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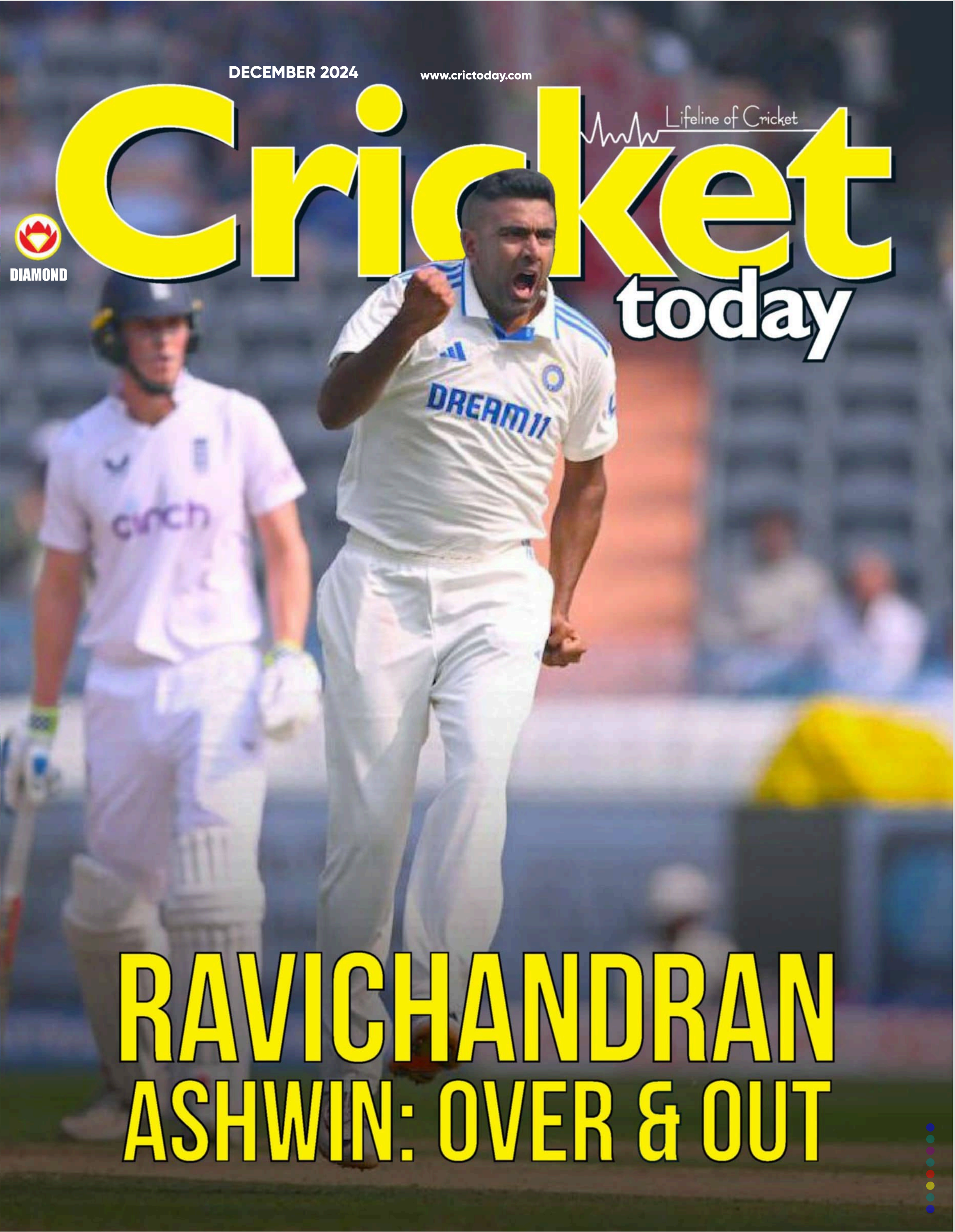
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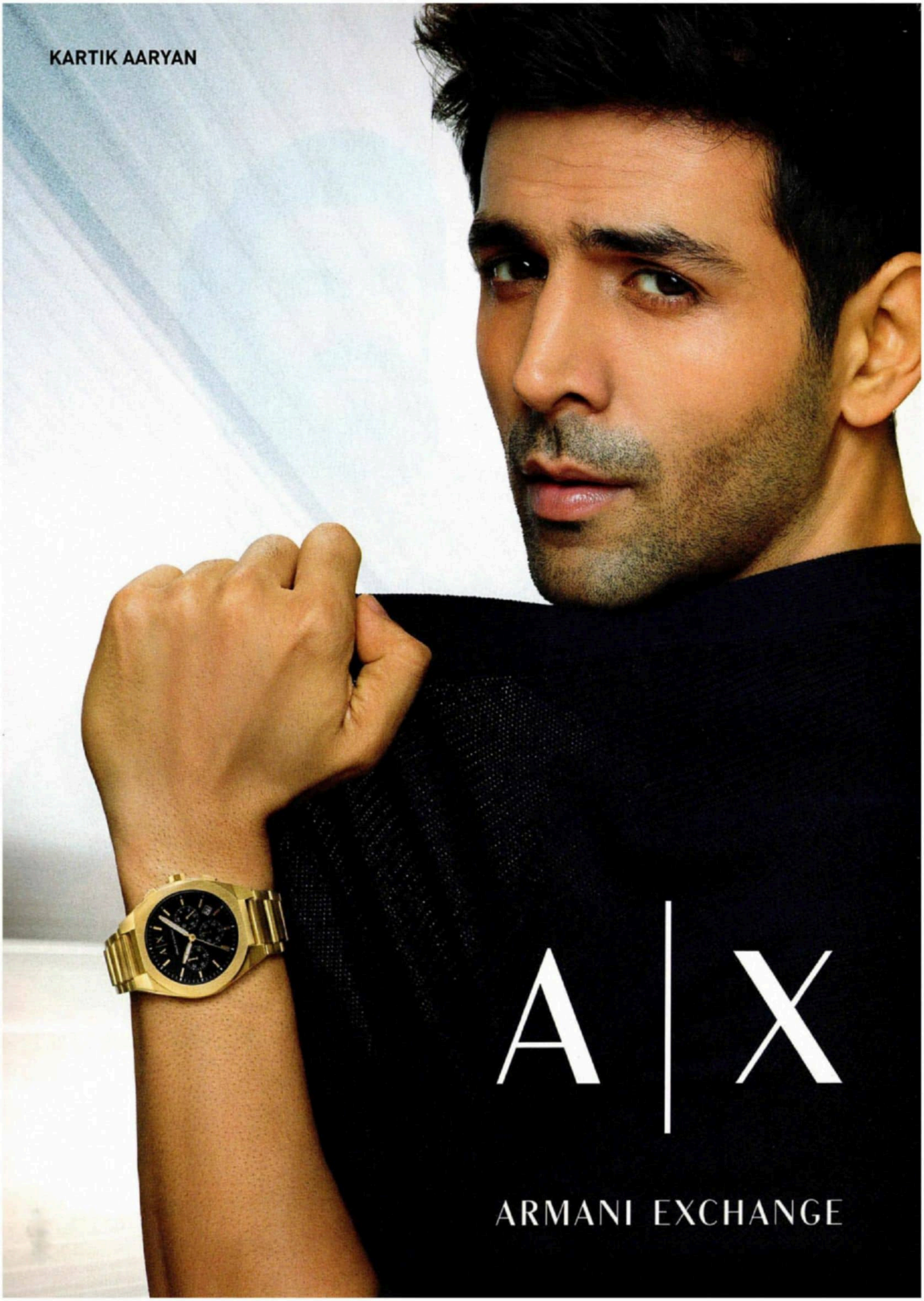
RAVICHANDRAN ASHWIN: OVER & OUT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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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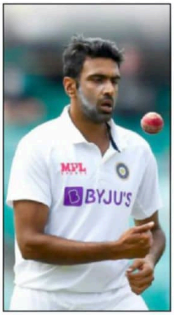
Star Indian allrounder Ravichandran Ashwin announced his immediate retirement from international cricket Ashwin announced at a hastily-called media conference following the drawn Test between Australia and India at the Gabba. Ashwin played 106 tests for India since his 2011 debut, taking 537 wickets. He took more wickets against Australia than any other country, with 115 at 28.58 in 23 tests against them. India captain Rohit Sharma said he was aware of Ashwin's desire to walk away before the start of the series but convinced him to play in Adelaide last week. The 38-year-old spinner was then left out of the third Test in Brisbane, with Ravindra Jadeja taking his spot. Ashwin's call means he will not be available for the final two tests in Australia, with Jadeja and Washington Sundar the two remaining spinners in the squad. His retirement has stunned the former players and the fans, with some accusing the team management of humiliating the legendary bowler. The call was expected but not midway through the series as the pitch in Syndey offers assistance to the spinners, and Ashwin could have been handy in the final game. His father is unhappy and has levelled serious allegations, saying continuous humiliation forced his son to take the step. His former teammate, S Badrinath, brought the state subject into the limelight. He feels Ashwin was often sidelined because he was from Tamil Nadu, and the players from the state are not given enough chances in the Indian team. Meanwhile, his retirement has put pressure on Rohit, Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja. Sharma and Kohli have not done anything impressive in the Test, leaving the team in trouble. Kohli scored a hundred in the second innings of the first Test but the remaining outings have been shocking. The same goes for Rohit, who doesn't have answers for the pacers these days. Both are nearing the end of their careers, and there is a possibility of them hanging up their boots from the format after the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. On the other hand, South Africa have made a big statement in red-ball cricket and are likely to play in the final of the World Test Championship. They have a two-match Test series coming up against Pakistan, and if the Proteas even one game, they will make it to the mega match. Despite all the odds, the Temba Bavuma-led team has shown considerable improvement across departments and would face India or Australia in the final of the WTC. The IPL 2025 mega auction was full of excitement and action, with Rishabh Pant becoming the most expensive player ever in the history of the league. Enjoy the action-packed edition of Cricket Today.



Star Indian allrounder Ravichandran Ashwin announced his immediate retirement from international cricket.

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THE WEEK THAT WAS

PERFECT REVENGE: Mohammed Siraj celebrates the wicket of Australia's Travis Head on day five of the third cricket Test between India and Australia.

BOOM BOOM BUMRAH: India's Jasprit Bumrah celebrates the wicket of Australia's Marnus Labuschagne during the third contest against Australia at the Gabba in Brisbane. He took nine wickets in the match.

SENSATIONAL PERFORMANCE: Pakistan's players celebrate beating South Africa in the first ODI International cricket match held at Boland Park in Paarl, South Africa.

DAVIS CUP
2024 WORLD CHAMPIONS
THE WORLD CUP OF TENNIS

SECOND CONSECUTIVE TITLE: Italy's Matteo Berrettini holds the Davis Cup trophy as teammates applaud after winning the final against Netherlands at the Martin Carpena Sports Hall in Malaga. Italy won its second consecutive Davis Cup title.

THE WEEK THAT WAS

WINNING CELEBRATION: McLaren driver Lando Norris of Britain celebrates after winning the Formula One Abu Dhabi Grand Prix at the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

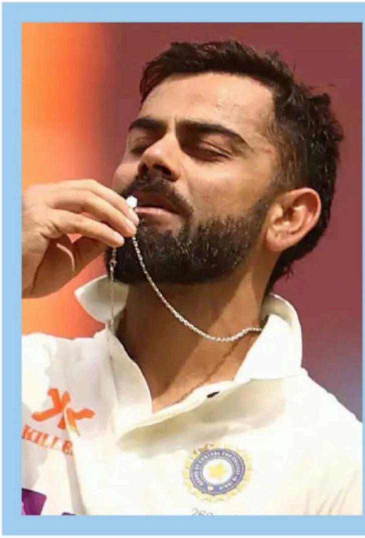
Hero
WORLD CHALLENGE
Henrik Stenson 2019
Viktor Hovland 2021
Viktor Hovland
Fowler

SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN: Scottie Scheffler, of the United States, poses with the championship trophy after the final round of the Hero World Challenge PGA Tour at the Albany Golf Club in New Providence, Bahamas.

Cricket Buzz

"Getting the opportunity to lead the team is special. It's a challenge, and I am looking forward to it"

- Mitchell Santner on becoming New Zealand's white-ball captain



REBIRTH OF VIRAT KOHLI

With R Ashwin retiring from international cricket after the third Test against Australia, the spotlight would be on Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma, who haven't been among the runs and are nearing the end of their careers. The series still has two Tests left, and the pitches at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the Sydney Cricket Ground are best for the batters. Former Australia player Matthew Hayden had predicted the rebirth of Virat Kohli at the MCG. "It could be a rebirth for Virat Kohli and even Usman Khawaja, for that matter. The wicket at the MCG is good for the batters. The new ball would do a bit, but if you get your eyes in, it is all for the batters.

"I want to become richer than Pakistan"

- Shoaib Akhtar on his future goals

STERN WARNING TO YASHASVI JAISWAL

Mitchell Starc is making sure to take Yashasvi Jaiswal's wicket early in the innings in the ongoing five-Test series against Australia. Actually, Jaiswal had mocked the speedster, saying he was bowling slow, and the sledging incident back-fired. Former India player Sunil Gavaskar has given a stern warning to the Indian opener. "You should do all the talking with your bat and not mouth. If a rival player is saying something to you, you can reply back but don't start the conversation from your side. Remember, this game can bite you on your back and bite you very hard. Jaiswal will have to concentrate on his batting rather than other stuff," Sunil Gavaskar said on Star Sports.

RAVICHANDRAN ASHWIN'S NEW PROFESSION

Ravichandran Ashwin announced his retirement from international cricket in the presence of captain Rohit Sharma. Ashwin didn't take questions from the journalists, with a promise of doing the exercise at a later stage. Rohit, who was sitting next to him, heaped massive praise on a player who he had known since his U-17 days. In a frank discussion, he also gave a hint of the off-spinners new profession. "Don't worry, he will be around you people," indicating to the media persons that Ashwin would wear the commentator's hat. His line was picked up by Mark Nicholas, who was sitting with Sunil Gavaskar and Matthew Hayden in the box.

SPECIAL GIFT FOR ASHWIN

India spinner Ravichandran has bid adieu to international cricket after the third Test against Australia in Brisbane. He was not a part of the playing XI and decided that his time with the national team was over. To pay tribute to him for his contributions, Australia's off-spinner Nathan Lyon gave him a signed jersey. Pat Cummins also congratulated the legendary bowler, who has taken over 500 wickets in his Test career. Overall, he took 765 wickets from 379 innings in international cricket. From the bat, he scored six hundreds and 14 fifties in the longest format of the game. "Respect for Aswhin. Just the way he conducted himself on and off the field for a long period of time and his skill is magnificent. We have had different opinions, and I enjoyed my conversations with him," Nathan Lyon said on Fox Sports.

GAMBHIR'S ROLE IN R ASHWIN'S RETIREMENT

Ravichandran Ashwin's decision to retire from international cricket surprised many but anyone who has been following him over the years knows that it was bound to happen. When head coach Gautam Gambhir decided to prefer Washington Sundar over him in Perth, he knew what what future holds for him. Jadeja and Sundar would have played ahead of him if there was a need to play two spinners in the fifth and final Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground. All this forced Ashwin to retire. "Rohit wasn't in Perth, and it was head coach Gautam Gambhir who went ahead with Washington Sundar signaling that who will be the team's No.1 spinner in the near future and Ashwin was not in the plans," a report by PTI stated.

RAVICHANDRAN ASHWIN'S RETIREMENT: AN UNCEREMONIOUS END TO A GLORIOUS CAREER

The off-spinner has 537 wickets in 106 test matches with 37 5-fers and has scored 3503 runs with the bat with 14 50s and 6 100s to his name. In this blog, we delve into the reasons behind Ashwin's retirement and the circumstances that may have pushed one of India's greatest matchwinners into ending his illustrious career prematurely...

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BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

On December 18, 2024, Indian cricket witnessed a seismic moment as one of its stalwarts, Ravichandran Ashwin, announced his retirement from international cricket following the third Test of the ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy 2024-25. Ashwin's decision has left fans and pundits in shock, especially given its timing and the events leading up to it. The off-spinner has 537 wickets in 106 test matches with 37 5-fers and has scored 3503 runs with the bat with 14 50s and 6 100s to his name. In this blog, we delve into the reasons behind Ashwin's retirement and the circumstances that may have pushed one of India's greatest match-winners into ending his illustrious career prematurely.

THE TIMELINE OF EVENTS LEADING TO RETIREMENT

Ashwin's announcement came shortly after India drew the Brisbane Test, marking a pivotal moment in the series. Captain Rohit Sharma later revealed that Ashwin had expressed his desire to retire as early as the first Test of the series. This statement sparked debates about whether Ashwin's decision was entirely personal or influenced by external factors. Having been dropped for the opening Test of the series, Ashwin returned for the day-night encounter in Adelaide. Despite his contributions, he was again omitted for the third Test in favor of Ravindra Jadeja. The lack of consistent opportunities during the series further raised questions about the management's approach towards Ashwin.

FACTORS THAT PUSHED ASHWIN INTO EARLY RETIREMENT

THE RISE OF WASHINGTON SUNDAR

Washington Sundar's stellar performance in recent years has been a significant factor in Ashwin's marginalization. Sundar's rise reached its zenith during the home Test series against New Zealand, where he

picked up a remarkable 10-wicket haul. For three years, Sundar has been knocking on the selectors' doors with consistent performances, both with the ball and the bat. His ability to provide balance to the side has made him a strong contender for the all-rounder's spot, traditionally occupied by Ashwin or Jadeja. With Sundar emerging as the future of Indian spin-bowling, the team management seemed inclined to prioritize youth and longevity. This created a challenging environment for Ashwin to maintain his place in the playing XI.

AGE AND FITNESS CONCERNS

At 38, Ashwin was among the senior-most players in the Indian team. While age alone is not a disqualifying factor, it often invites increased scrutiny, especially in a team that has been striving to rebuild after setbacks like the 2023-24 World Test Championship (WTC) final. The physical demands of Test cricket, combined with India's packed schedule, may have raised concerns about Ashwin's ability to deliver consistently at the highest level. Critics pointed out his declining effectiveness in recent overseas tours, citing it as a justification for exploring younger options.

THE WTC FINAL CONTROVERSY

One of the most contentious moments in Ashwin's recent career was his exclusion from the playing XI in the WTC final against Australia in 2023-24. At the time, Ashwin was the leading wicket-taker in the WTC cycle, and his omission drew widespread criticism. The decision to bench Ashwin in conditions that seemed tailor-made for him was perceived as a lack of faith in his abilities in overseas conditions. This incident likely left a lasting impact on Ashwin's confidence and relationship with the team management.

PRESSURE TO MAKE CHANGES AFTER THE NEW ZEALAND WHITEWASH

India's 3-0 home series loss to New Zealand earlier in 2024 was a wake-up call for the team. The defeat, particularly on spin-friendly tracks, led to widespread criticism of senior players. The management, eager to signal a transition, seemed to target Ashwin as the scapegoat. While stalwarts like Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli remained untouchable due to their leadership roles and status, Ashwin's position was more vulnerable. This sentiment was exacerbated by his underwhelming performance in the series, further fueling calls for change.

LACK OF SUPPORT IN OVERSEAS TESTS

Ashwin's record in SENA (South Africa, England, New Zealand, and Australia) countries has often been scrutinized. Despite playing crucial roles in several overseas victories, the absence of five-wicket hauls in these regions has been a talking point. However, this statistic overlooks the broader picture. Ashwin

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frequently bowled in less favorable conditions, often performing admirably in holding roles while picking up crucial wickets. In matches where he was dropped, such as the WTC final, his absence was keenly felt, further highlighting his value.

THE FINAL NAIL: A TOUGH HOME SERIES

Ashwin's recent performances at home, including a rare century against Bangladesh, showcased his all-round capabilities. However, his bowling was deemed less effective during the series. Critics were quick to point out that Ashwin's strengths as a spinner seemed to be waning, even on pitches that historically favored him. This perception, combined with the team's broader struggles, made Ashwin an easy target for those advocating for a generational shift.

LEGACY TARNISHED BY CIRCUMSTANCES

Ravichandran Ashwin's retirement comes with an air of melancholy. Despite being one of the greatest spinners in Indian cricket history, his final years were marked by controversy, questionable selection decisions, and diminishing support from the team management. Ashwin retires as India's second-highest wicket-taker in Tests, with over 500 scalps to his name. His contributions to Indian cricket, both at home and abroad, are immeasurable. From his memorable performances against Australia in Chennai to his match-winning heroics in India's historic series victory Down Under in 2020-21, Ashwin has left an indelible mark on the game.

A CASE FOR BETTER TREATMENT

Ashwin's case raises important questions about how senior players are managed in Indian cricket. While change is inevitable in any team, the transition process should respect the contributions of veterans. Forcing a player of Ashwin's calibre into early retirement not only diminishes their legacy but also sets a concerning precedent. Players who have served the team with distinction deserve a dignified exit, free from the politics and pressures that often characterize team selections. Ravichandran Ashwin's retirement marks the end of an era for Indian cricket. While various factors may have hastened his departure, his legacy as one of the greatest off-spinners in history remains untarnished.

As Indian cricket looks to the future with players like Washington Sundar stepping up, fans will continue to cherish the countless memories Ashwin has provided over the years. His journey, though ending on a bittersweet note, will inspire generations of cricketers to come. In the end, cricket is a game of transitions, but the void left by legends like Ashwin is never easily filled. India bids farewell to a true champion, hoping that his wisdom and experience will continue to shape the game in other capacities. ■

FOUR INDIA PLAYERS WHO SHOULD RETIRE AFTER BGT 2024-25

Rohit Sharma led India to a famous T20 World Cup title win in June but since the Test series against Bangladesh at home, the 37-year-old's fortunes have gone downhill. The hard-hitting batter has failed to deliver, both as a captain and batter, sparking fans' demand to retire immediately. Having scored just one fifty...

BY SHUBAM GHOSH

With India struggling in all departments against Australia in the ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy (BGT) 2024-25 Down Under, quite a few careers could be on the verge of conclusion. India's performance in Tests has come under the scanner since their home series against New Zealand, which they lost 0-3, and now Australia are looking strong to reclaim the BGT; the current phase is one of the dullest in the country's cricketing history and heads are likely to roll.

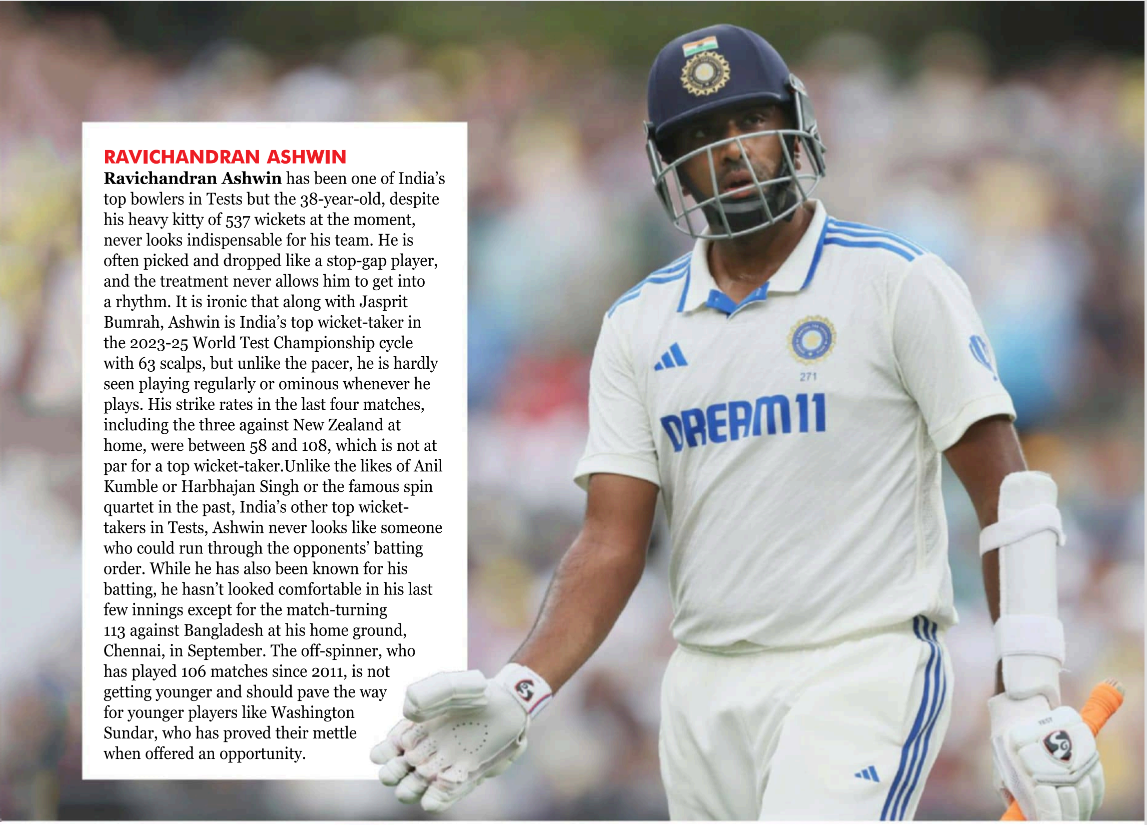
In this space, we pick four players in the Indian squad touring Australia who should either retire at the end of the series or be asked to step down. They have been given a long rope for far too long but successive failure with either bat or ball has now made it a foregone conclusion, even if they deliver in the remaining part of the Australia tour.

ROHIT SHARMA

Rohit Sharma led India to a famous T20 World Cup title win in June but since the Test series against Bangladesh at home, the 37-year-old's fortunes have gone downhill. The hard-hitting batter has failed to deliver, both as a captain and batter, sparking fans' demand to retire immediately. Having scored just one fifty in his last 13 innings, even after demoting himself down the order against Australia, Sharma has convinced the supporters that he has little to offer now. As a captain, he has lost four Tests in a row and is not looking energetic and optimistic enough to make a comeback soon. Rohit Sharma was never a batter who could capitalize on red-ball cricket, even though he scored centuries in his first two Tests in 2013. The uncertainty outside the off stump and the lack of footwork to withstand either pace or spin attack has left Sharma terribly exposed, and the only tactic of hitting big shots will work little in demanding Test conditions, and it is not. With age, Sharma's reflexes are not getting any better, and it is time for him to quit the arena. His act of leaving his gloves outside the dugout after getting out in the first innings in Brisbane fueled the speculation that it was a hint towards the end of a career that has lasted 66 games and saw 4,289 runs at an average of 41 plus so far.

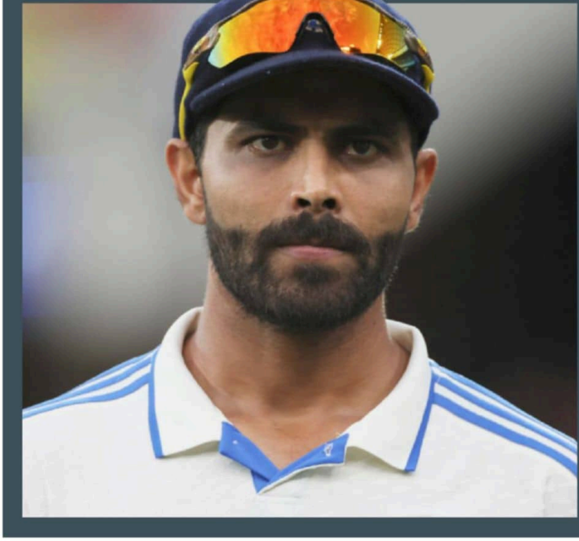
VIRAT KOHLI

Virat Kohli completed 36 in November and going by the standard set by Master Blaster Sachin Tendulkar, who he has been chasing in world cricket, he should still have a few years left in him. But Kohli's pathetic show of late, irrespective of his Bradman-eclipsing hundred in the first Test in Perth, points at another sunset on the horizon. The man is trying his best to hit form by spending enough time in the nets, but in the matches, he looks far too vulnerable outside the off stump. His dismissal at The Gabba, where he chased a delivery far outside to give an edge when India needed him badly, angered former great Sunil Gavaskar. Kohli had a horrible tour of England in 2014 when he faced a similar problem but rectified it later. Now, at 36, he might not have much time left to make amends. Kohli's frequency of scoring hundreds in Tests has dropped alarmingly over the years, and barring the hundred in Perth, he could make just one fifty in his last 14 outings. Kohli's horror run at the key No.4 position has made the Indian batting look vulnerable, and the team has often failed to overcome the blows of him and Rohit Sharma getting out cheaply. Time to inject new blood. Quitting the red-ball game will not take away Kohli's greatness, even if he falls short of 10,000 runs.



RAVICHANDRAN ASHWIN

Ravichandran Ashwin has been one of India's top bowlers in Tests but the 38-year-old, despite his heavy kitty of 537 wickets at the moment, never looks indispensable for his team. He is often picked and dropped like a stop-gap player, and the treatment never allows him to get into a rhythm. It is ironic that along with Jasprit Bumrah, Ashwin is India's top wicket-taker in the 2023-25 World Test Championship cycle with 63 scalps, but unlike the pacer, he is hardly seen playing regularly or ominous whenever he plays. His strike rates in the last four matches, including the three against New Zealand at home, were between 58 and 108, which is not at par for a top wicket-taker.Unlike the likes of Anil Kumble or Harbhajan Singh or the famous spin quartet in the past, India's other top wicket-takers in Tests, Ashwin never looks like someone who could run through the opponents' batting order. While he has also been known for his batting, he hasn't looked comfortable in his last few innings except for the match-turning 113 against Bangladesh at his home ground, Chennai, in September. The off-spinner, who has played 106 matches since 2011, is not getting younger and should pave the way for younger players like Washington Sundar, who has proved their mettle when offered an opportunity.



RAVINDRA JADEJA

India's other 'Ravi' spinner is also ageing and the drop in the energy level is clearly showing. Ravindra Jadeja's name will remain etched on India's cricketing history as a man with golden arms, who could bat, bowl and field well. But in the current Test match at The Gabba, the 36-year-old's presence on the ground largely went unnoticed while India were fielding. He conceded 95 runs with no reward in the first innings and was hit by the Australian batters at will. Jadeja indeed picked a 10-wicket haul in his last Test against New Zealand at home, but the fact that he was not selected for the first two games against Australia shows that the management did not have enough trust in him in the Australian conditions even though he averages less than 29 Down Under. Jadeja scored a gritty fifty under pressure at The Gabba to make up for his ordinary bowling performance. But with the likes of Sundar and Axar Patel waiting in the wings, Jadeja's road ahead might not be too long. Why not call it a day after doing whatever best he can do in the current series? In 77 games before the Brisbane Test, Jadeja has made more than 3,000 runs and taken 319 wickets.

FIVE REASONS BEHIND THE SUCCESS OF SOUTH AFRICA IN THE WORLD TEST CHAMPIONSHIP

South Africa's head coach, Shukri Conrad, however, remained optimistic. After his team defeated the Caribbeans by 40 runs in the second Test in Providence to take the series 1-0, he said his team still had some good opportunities to grow as a Test team, and enough wins in their kitty could see him making the final...

BY SHIUBAM GHOSH

The 2023-25 cycle of the World Test Championship (WTC) became interesting as it approached the business end, with South Africa coming out of nowhere to reach the top of the points table, needing just one win against Pakistan in their upcoming three-game series to seal a berth. It was only a few months ago that the Proteas found themselves at No.5 of the WTC points table with just two wins out of six matches. They were denied a win by rain against the bottom-placed West Indies at Port of Spain, resulting in frustration.

South Africa's head coach, Shukri Conrad, however, remained optimistic. After his team defeated the Caribbeans by 40 runs in the second Test in Providence to take the series 1-0, he said his team still had some good opportunities to grow as a Test team, and enough wins in their kitty could see him making the final of the WTC. Fast forward to December, and the Proteas have benefited from their coach's prescription. They had a cent percent win record in their next four outings, and it catapulted them ahead of two strong contenders – Australia and India – who played the final of the last WTC cycle in 2023.

In August, South Africa's PCT (points percentage system) was 38.89, much behind India's then PCT of 68.52 and Australia's 62.50. Now, it has shot up to 63.30 against Australia's 60.71 and India's 57.29.

What made South Africa register such an incredible turnaround in the current WTC to reach the top two?

A COMPARATIVELY EASY SCHEDULE:

South Africa, who finished fifth and third in the previous two WTC cycles, found a relatively easy schedule for the current cycle. They had three Asian teams for a two-game home series – India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Out of them, India and Pakistan have never beaten them at home, while Sri Lanka's current form made their Test series win in South Africa in 2018-19 look long buried in the past. The Proteas' away series were in the West Indies, New Zealand and Bangladesh, all of which again were relatively easier opponents.

INDIA'S SHOCKING LOSS AGAINST NEW ZEALAND AT HOME:

India's 0-3 defeat against New Zealand at home, something which even the greatest cricketing analyst would not have predicted, turned the entire calculations in this WTC upside down. After hammering Bangladesh 2-0, India looked favourites to beat the Kiwis but their batters' helpless surrender against the visiting team's spinners gave both South Africa and Australia big openings. India

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currently have a herculean task to register a comprehensive win over Australia Down Under to get back into the top two or the Proteas play the final at their expense -- the second scenario looking more believable at the moment.

TEAM EFFORT: While an easier schedule and India's defeat against New Zealand did help South Africa in the 2023-24 WTC cycle, they still had to win their games. After winning just two Tests and drawing one in their first six matches, South Africa turned things around with four consecutive wins – two each against Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. A loss against India, a draw against the West Indies, and sending a second-string side to New Zealand because of SA20 compulsions only to get thrashed did not produce the desired results for them, yet they did not lose the self-belief and won games under different captains.

Their regular Test captain, Temba Bavuma, missed matches against India and Bangladesh, but Aiden Markram ensured that the team won two crucial matches against Bangladesh. When he returned, Bavuma led from the front with his bat with a century and three half-centuries to give South Africa two comprehensive wins over Sri Lanka.

SOUTH AFRICA INVESTING IN YOUNGSTERS AND FUTURE: Under head coach Conrad who has in the past managed South Africa's Under-19 team, the Proteas have certainly made progress, especially in their batting approach. After several big names in their ranks bid adieu to the game, South Africa needed to overcome the transition fast, and they have done it wonderfully well. While their decision to send an inexperienced team to New Zealand to play Tests faced a backlash, it certainly gave their fresh lot much-needed exposure at the highest

level. David Bedingham is one such name who, after hitting a century in that tour, is slowly emerging into a middle-order mainstay in the national team.

The likes of Tony de Zorzi, Pieter Mulder, Kyle Verreynne, and Tristan Stubbs, who has been backed by the coach, have chipped in with handy runs, sometimes even hundreds, whenever the team has required. While Bangladesh might not be among the most powerful opponents, they are certainly a tough team to beat at home and South Africa's fearless and dominating game proved that they do not play with a defensive mindset anymore. That has played a key role in their superlative comeback into the WTC race for the final.

RABADA & MAHARAJ: Two players who have made some serious contributions to South Africa's successful run in the WTC of late are pacer Kagiso Rabada and spinner Keshav Maharaj. They have been two of their side's best performers who have done consistently well to propel their team to the top position despite playing fewer games. Rabada has 39 scalps in just eight matches this WTC cycle at an impressive average of 17.07 and with three five-wicket hauls.

HIS EXPLOITS HAVE BEEN LIKE: India (11 scalps), West Indies (8 scalps), Bangladesh (14 scalps), and Sri Lanka (6 scalps). Maharaj, on the other hand, has picked 35 wickets in seven outings at an average of 19.20 and two five- and four-wicket hauls. His wickets in this cycle include West Indies (13), Bangladesh (13), and Sri Lanka (9). The consistency of their two premium bowlers with contrasting styles has paid off for South Africa. Rabada was selected as the player of the series in Bangladesh, while Maharaj clinched the honour in the West Indies, showing how well South Africa's bowling has served them overseas. ■

IPL 2025: 3 STRENGTHS AND 3 WEAKNESSES OF MUMBAI INDIANS

At the mega auction in Jeddah, the five-time champions roped in Trent Boult for a whopping Rs. 12.5 crore. They also shelled out a chunk of their money for Deepak Chahar, Naman Dhir, Will Jacks, and Allah Ghazanfar. MI also made some smart buys with Ryan Rickelton....

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Mumbai Indians will be keen to showcase their credentials after some poor seasons post their last title win (2020) in the Indian Premier League. MI finished 5th in 2021, last in 2022, playoff stage in 2023, and last in 2024. Skipper Hardik Pandya, who had a tough time as captain in IPL 2024, has his hands full. He has to deliver from the front to get this side going. Ahead of the IPL 2025 mega auction, MI retained 5 players Hardik, Rohit Sharma, Tilak Varma, Suryakumar Yada,v and Jasprit Bumrah. So half of the team was already settled.

At the mega auction in Jeddah, the five-time champions roped in Trent Boult for a whopping Rs. 12.5 crore. They also shelled out a chunk of their money for Deepak Chahar, Naman Dhir, Will Jacks, and Allah Ghazanfar. MI also made some smart buys with Ryan Rickelton, Reece Tople,y and Mitchell Santner in the ranks. A lot of their other purchases were uncapped Indians. MI have a big squad to work with and one hopes they come good this time around. This is also a squad that boasts pedigree and weakness at the same time. There are a few holes and it's something the management will want to sort out when the season begins in March. Ahead of the IPL 2025 season, we decode the strengths, weaknesses, and takeaways of MI's 23-man squad.

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PLAYER RETAINED BY MUMBAI: Jasprit Bumrah (Rs. 18 crore), Suryakumar Yadav (Rs. 16.35 crore), Hardik Pandya (16.35 crore), Rohit Sharma (Rs. 16.3 crore), Tilak Varma (Rs. 8 crore)

PLAYERS BOUGHT AT THE AUCTION: Trent Boult (Rs. 12.50 crore), Naman Dhir (Rs. 5.25 crore), Robin Minz (Rs. 65 lakh), Karn Sharma (Rs. 50 lakh), Ryan Rickelton (Rs. 1 crore), Deepak Chahar (Rs. 9.25 crore), Allah Ghazanfar (Rs. 4.80 crore), Will Jacks (Rs. 5.25 crore), Ashwani Kumar (Rs. 30 lakh), Mitchell Santner (Rs. 2 crore), Reece Topley (Rs. 75 lakh), Krishnan Shrijith (Rs. 30 lakh), Raj Angad Bawa (Rs. 30 lakh), Satyanarayana Raju (Rs. 30 lakh), Bevon Jacobs (Rs. 30 lakh), Arjun Tendulkar (Rs. 30 lakh), Lizaad Williams (Rs. 75 lakh), Vignesh Puthur (Rs. 30 lakh)

STRENGTHS OF MI

MI have a powerful core in terms of retained names. Rohit Sharma remains a fan favorite and the veteran opener who will be backed for the starts. At number three, Tilak Varma is the real deal. He recently smashed three successive T20 tons, making history. He has become an integral part of the Indian cricket team squad in T20Is. India's T20I skipper, Suryakumar Yadav, brings versatility and match-

winning skills at number four. He can make all the difference with his shot-making abilities. In Hardik, MI have a desired all-rounder, who played a key role in the T20 World Cup win. He has also been playing a good brand of cricket for Baroda in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy. And then, a leader with the ball – Jasprit Bumrah continues to shoulder the responsibility of providing the ammunition. These are well-oiled cricketers who boast pedigree and panache.

The 2nd major strength is the main pace attack which has a lot of versatility. Chahar brings the subtleness with his variations upfront. The former Chennai Super Kings man owns 77 scalps in the IPL, and notably, 58 of his wickets have come in the powerplay. He can give MI an ideal start. The addition of Boult will aid MI. His presence alongside Chahar make MI a deadly side in the first six overs. In his past three seasons with Rajasthan Royals, Boult claimed 45 scalps at 27.71.

Boult, who played for MI in the past, owns 38 wickets for them at 22.71. He also played for KKR, DC and SRH in the past. Overall, the Kiwi international owns 121 wickets in 104 IPL games. As per ESPNcricinfo, he has 62 power play wickets in the IPL at 27.06.

Bumrah is the champion performer and the leader of the pack. He is valuable whenever you bring him on, and his numbers in the last 4 overs are magnificent. In overs 17-20, he owns 80 scalps at just 19.5. He had a solid IPL 2024 season, taking 20 scalps at 16.80.

Another strength of this Mumbai side is the addition of Jacks and Rickelton. In Jacks, MI get an aggressive top-order batter, who will likely open alongside Rohit. In T20s, Jacks owns 4847 runs, with his strike rate being 157-plus. As an opener, the Englishman's strike rate is close to 160. 4090 of his runs have come as an opener. Notably, 2866 of his runs have come in the first six overs (SR: 162.74). On the other hand, South Africa's Rickelton serves as a solid backup for Jacks. The wicketkeeper batter owns 2709 runs from 100 innings.

WEAKNESSES OF MUMBAI

MI doesn't have a strong spin unit. Karn Sharma is the leading Indian spinner in the ranks. He owns 76 scalps from 84 matches. He had an ordinary IPL 2024, where he averaged 36-plus and conceded at 10.58. From 2013-15, Karn was a regular,r but he has since then been a backup player with poor returns from the chances he has got.

Mitchell Santner has had few opportunities, playing just 18 matches in the five seasons he has featured in. He owns 15 scalps at 28.13. MI could be forced to play Santner, given the little resources in spin.

The third spin option is Ghazanfar of Afghanistan,

who has had a good start to his T20 career as he averages 11.62 and his ER reads 5.71. However, he hasn't played in the IPL and he has not made his debut in T20Is yet for the Afghans. So he is this rookie spinner who hasn't faced the world's best batters. This could expose him largely.

Naman Dhir was bought for a huge sum of Rs. 5.25 crore. He has played in only one season of the IPL. He scored 140 runs from 7 matches in his debut season last year. With a strike rate of 177.21, he seems as someone who can aid Pandya in that finishing role. Naman doesn't have much experience in T20s. He has played in just 19 matches scoring 311 runs from 17 innings. He is also most likely to be an option as an impact player.

MI will be over-reliant on their three Indian quicks and Pandya. Barring these four, where is the bench strength? MI lack a quality Indian pacer as a backup. Their pace options are too raw and uncooked for this level. Similarly, in batting, they have no Indian batters as backups. Robin Minz, who is expected to have a role in the XI because of the balance, has 7 T20s under his belt.

MI PROBABLE XI FOR IPL 2025

Will Jacks, Rohit Sharma, Tilak Varma, Suryakumar Yadav, Hardik Pandya (c), Robin Minz (wk), Mitchell Santner, Allah Ghazanfar, Trent Boult, Deepak Chahar, Jasprit Bumrah.

IMPACT PLAYERS FOR MI

MI need to find the right impact players. Naman seems the ideal pick to start. If MI bat first, they can name three foreigners with Naman present. When they bowl, Ghazanfar can come in for Dhir. If they choose to play Karn ahead of Ghazanfar, then someone like Rickelton may be in the thought process. That means batters could be pushed one place below, or Jacks will be used in the middle.

KEY PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

TILAK VARMA: The young Indian star has all the ingredients to go big. Varma owns 3182 runs in T20s at a solid 44.81. His strike rate is 148-plus. He owns 4 tons already and has hit 158 sixes to date.

MUMBAI MAY MISS OUT ON A PLAYOFF BERTH

Mumbai are a strong side with their usuals bolstering the batting and bowling. But there are big holes. There are big question marks on players like Naman and Robin, who would be needed to make an impression. The spin department lacks the wow factor. Rohit's form of late in the IPL is a worry as well. MI can suffer if any of their star names suffer an injury. This side could finish out of the top six. ■

IPL 2025: 3 STRENGTHS AND 1 MAJOR WEAKNESS OF CHENNAI SUPER KINGS

The mega auction saw CSK get several steal deals with the most amount of money spent on Afghan spinner Noor Ahmad and veteran off-spinner Ashwin. CSK also have several international bowlers to back Pathirana and Curran. It's a bowling-heavy side, and with 7 matches set to be played at the Chepauk...

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BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Chennai Super Kings, like always, have a different strategy when it comes to the Indian Premier League auction. The IPL mega auction ahead of the 2025 season was no different for them. CSK are a side that knows what it wants, and that's why they have been five-time champions. After a poor IPL 2024 season, CSK will want to bounce back and showcase their strengths with the squad they have assembled. CSK is a side that runs deep in terms of personnel, with several Indian players in the mix. The bowling, in particular, was an area they addressed after having let go of several players. Ahead of the auction, CSK retained 5 players MS Dhoni, Shivam Dube, Rituraj Gaikwad, Ravindra Jadeja, and Matheesha Pathirana.

At the auction over two days, CSK got experienced names with a hint of young players to back the same. Notably, CSK will keep drawing fans with the presence of MS Dhoni and the return of former spinner Ravichandran Ashwin. CSK also got back their two New Zealand players Devon Conway and Rachin Ravindra. Notably, the RTM card was used for Ravindra. Pace-bowling all-rounder Sam Curran also returns to the side after playing for Punjab for a couple of seasons.

The mega auction saw CSK get several steal deals with the most amount of money spent on Afghan spinner Noor Ahmad and veteran off-spinner Ashwin. CSK also have several international bowlers to back Pathirana and Curran. It's a bowling-heavy side, and with 7 matches set to be played at the Chepauk, expect CSK to rely on the same. Ahead of the IPL 2025 season, we present you the strengths, weaknesses, and takeaways from CSK's squad.

CSK'S SQUAD FOR THE IPL 2025 SEASON

Retained players ahead of the auction: Ruturaj Gaikwad, Matheesha Pathirana, Shivam Dube, Ravindra Jadeja, MS Dhoni.

PLAYERS BOUGHT: Devon Conway (Rs. 6.25 crore), Rahul Tripathi (Rs. 3.40 crore), Rachin Ravindra (Rs. 4 crore), R. Ashwin (Rs. 9.75 crore), Khaleel Ahmed (Rs. 4.80 crore), Noor Ahmad (Rs. 10 crore), Vijay Shankar (Rs. 1.20 crore), Sam Curran (Rs. 2.40 crore), Shaik Rasheed (Rs. 30 lakh), Anshul Kamboj (Rs. 3.40 crore), Mukesh Choudhary (Rs. 30 lakh), Deepak Hooda (Rs. 1.70 crore), Gurjapneet Singh (Rs. 2.20 crore), Nathan Ellis (Rs. 2 crore), Jamie Overton (Rs. 1.50 crore), Kamlesh Nagarkoti (Rs. 30 lakh), Ramakrishna Ghosh (Rs. 30 lakh), Shreyas Gopal (Rs. 30 lakh), Vansh Bedi (Rs. 55 lakh), Andre Siddarth (Rs. 30 lakh).

MPL SPORTS
BYJU'S

STRENGTHS OF CSK

CSK have perhaps one of the best spin units. With the Chennai surface expected to aid spin, CSK will play three spinners and choke opponents. All three spinners are different from each other, which brings variety. Ashwin, who last played for CSK in 2015, returns to the side after spending time with Punjab, Delhi, and Rajasthan.

Ashwin, who has 212 games under his belt in the IPL, is the 5th-highest wicket-taker with 182 scalps. In 97 matches for CSK, he took 90 scalps at 24.22. What bodes well for him is that he has 50 scalps at Chepauk. Jadeja has been a reliable force for CSK, and with a tally of 160 wickets, he remains an OG. His economy rate of 6.75 at Chepauk is noteworthy. And finally, former Gujarat Titans spinner Noor has done a decent job with 24 scalps from 23 matches at 27.45. The youngster owns 137 scalps in T20s at just 23.08. So CSK will bank on 12 quality overs of spin in Chennai and test visiting teams on slow surfaces.

CSK have a strong pace unit on offer. Pathirana leads the attack. The Sri Lankan averages a solid 17.49 in T20 cricket. In the IPL, he averages 17.41 and owns 34 scalps from 20 matches. He is also a solid specialist in the final 4 overs, averaging 12.86 in the IPL and conceding at just 8.24. Former Delhi bowler Khaleel Ahmed was a superb buy. The left-arm pacer has 74 wickets in the IPL at 25.41. Last season, he bagged an impressive 17 scalps from 14 matches for DC. In 23 matches for CSK, Curran took 22 scalps. Overall, he has 58 scalps in the IPL. However, Curran is not a guaranteed starter. CSK can look up to Nathan Ellis if they need a foreign player. They also have another experienced name in Jamie Overton, who owns 100 T20 scalps. If they decide to play an Indian player, Anshul Kamboj leads the race. In 22 T20 matches, Kamboj owns 26 scalps at 19.88. Kamboj has a steady First-Class career, and recently, the Haryana pacer bagged 10 wickets in an innings in the Ranji Trophy.

Gurjapneet Singh is a pacy left-arm pacer and could be a surprise element. He averages a solid 18.55 in T20s. Mukesh Choudhary is an able customer in the ranks. He averages 22.61 in T20s, including 28.18 in the IPL.

Conway and Ruturaj are a settled opening force, with Ravindra being the backup for Conway. However, given the factor that CSK can rely on Indian pacers, Ravindra could come in, given he is a spin all-rounder and can fit in at number three. This means Rahul Tripathi will fit in at four with Dube at five. The front four or five is CSK's best, and a lot will rely on them. Dube, in particular, has a role to play and is the big hitter he is known for. Last season, he scored 396 runs, with his SR being 162.29.

WEAKNESSES OF CSK

Barring the above batters mentioned, CSK's batting looks shaky. Jadeja's form of late has dipped. Across the last three seasons, he owns 573 runs from 33 innings with his SR being 137.08. Jadeja isn't the main

issue here. You have Dhoni, who, with his questionable fitness, only bats in the last 1-2 overs. Last season, Dhoni faced only 73 balls. However, he struck at 220-plus and averaged over 53. In IPL 2023, Dhoni faced only 57 deliveries. CSK will be reliant on Jadeja and Dhoni as finishers. And both need to deliver the goods.

CSK surprised one and all after securing the likes of Vijay Shankar and Deepak Hooda. Despite boasting experience, they never quite managed to hit the ground running in the IPL. Hooda can be considered as CSK's worst buy, with Shankar close at 2nd. Hooda managed 145 runs in IPL 2024 for LSG and played only 11 games. In 2023, he scored a paltry 84 runs at 7.63. Similarly, Shankar played seven matches for GT in IPL 2024 and scored 83 runs. He was decent in IPL 2023 after a dismal 2022 season.

Neither batter could make the cut in the starting XI. They can be sparse resources. If any injury occurs, they could fill in. Now, barring these two in the middle, CSK have no major options on the bench. They have little-known options in uncapped Vansh Bedi, Andre Siddarth, and Shaikh Rasheed. So there is a lack of quality and experience on offer. It's a paper-thin batting. If Dhoni fights fitness issues, CSK will also struggle in the finishing department. This would force them to play Overton or Curran, meaning Ravindra would make his way out.

WHO CAN BE CSK'S IMPACT PLAYERS?

With the Impact Player rule, teams can name five substitutes and use one of them when needed. If four foreign players are already named in the XI, the impact player can only be an Indian. So CSK have work to do here and get the right call. If Ravindra plays, he can also be the 4th spinner alongside two pacers at Chepauk. When CSK go away, they can substitute Ravindra and bring in a third pacer in Kamboj.

PROBABLE CSK XI

Ruturaj Gaikwad (c), Devon Conway, Rachin Ravindra, Rahul Tripathi, Shivam Dube, Ravindra Jadeja, MS Dhoni (wk), R. Ashwin, Matheesha Pathirana, Khaleel Ahmed, Noor Ahmad.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Ruturaj Gaikwad: If CSK are to shine, skipper Gaikwad holds the key. He smashed a whopping 583 runs in IPL 2024, registering five 50-plus scores. With 2380 runs in the IPL at 41-plus, Gaikwad is the main force who needs to lead from the front.

CSK HAVE AN OUTSIDE CHANCE FOR TOP 4

CSK have a solid bowling unit and a powerful batting unit, especially if their main XI stays fit throughout. The bowling, in particular, holds the key, and that's where CSK look best. However, there are holes in the batting. The lack of bench strength and finishers are an issue. If CSK are to reach the playoffs, they need a solid contribution from their primary XI and hope players stay in form. ■

IPL 2025: 3 STRENGTHS AND 1 MAJOR WEAKNESS OF CHAMPIONS KKR

KKR have its core set of players, and the addition of seasoned figures such as Quinton de Kock and Anrich Nortje makes it a solid side that can be threatening for teams. KKR will be counting on consistent performances, as seen last year...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Kolkata Knight Riders will be out to shine in their armor in the upcoming 2025 edition of the Indian Premier League (IPL). Champions KKR, who have won the illustrious trophy on three counts, could be backed as one of the favorites. They retained six players ahead of the IPL 2025 mega auction to give us a primary look at their main playing XI. At the IPL 2025 auction, KKR bought back most of their players, barring 4-5 important names. It's a group that is settled, and the owners didn't do anything fancy to make wholesome changes. Rather, they have stuck to a winning team. KKR failed to get back skipper Shreyas Iyer, star pacer Mitchell Starc, and opener Phil Salt despite bidding for the trio. They also didn't show interest in Nitish Rana, who spent several seasons with the Eastern giants.

The mega auction in Jeddah saw the Knights break the banks to sign back Venkatesh Iyer. Once KKR missed out on Shreyas, they perhaps identified Venkatesh as the player who could lead them. He came in for a whopping INR 23.75 crore. It will be a crucial season for the Madhya Pradesh player to showcase his credentials as a potential leader. Venkatesh did well for the Knights last season, especially during the Qualifier 1 and final.

KKR have its core set of players, and the addition of seasoned figures such as Quinton de Kock and Anrich Nortje makes it a solid side that can be threatening for teams. KKR will be counting on consistent performances, as seen last year. The bowling is what needs to strike out, and if they match the standards set last season, a promising campaign will then await them. With the IPL 2025 auction over, here we present the strengths, weaknesses, and takeaways from the KKR squad.

KKR'S SQUAD FOR IPL 2025 SEASON

Retained players ahead of the auction: Rinku Singh (Rs. 13 crore), Varun Chakaravarthy (Rs. 12 crore), Sunil Narine (Rs. 12 crore), Andre Russell (Rs. 12 crore), Harshit Rana (Rs. 4 crore), Ramandeep Singh (Rs. 4 crore).

PLAYERS BOUGHT: Venkatesh Iyer (Rs. 23.75 crore), Quinton de Kock (Rs. 3.60 crore), Rahmanullah Gurbaz (Rs. 2 crore), Anrich Nortje (Rs. 6.50 crore), Angkrish Raghuvanshi (Rs. 3 crore), Vaibhav Arora (Rs. 1.80 crore), Mayank Markande (Rs. 30 lakh), Rovman Powell (Rs. 1.50 crore), Manish Pandey (Rs. 75 lakh), Spencer Johnson (Rs. 2.80 crore), Luvnith Sisodia (Rs. 30 lakh), Ajinkya Rahane (Rs. 1.50 lakh), Anukul Roy (Rs. 40 lakh), Moeen Ali (Rs. 2 crore), Umran Malik (Rs. 75 lakh).

THREE MAJOR STRENGTHS OF KKR

1) KKR's bowling is sturdy and has a nice blend. Before the auction, they already had around 14-16 overs fixed from their retained players. Spinners Narine and Varun hand you 8 solid overs. Varun is one of the IPL's best spinners. He took 20 wickets in IPL 2023 and picked another 21 last season to be KKR's most successful bowler. Narine had a crunch IPL 2024 season, taking a handful of 17 scalps. Both Varun and Narine's mystery spin would aid KKR.

Indian pacer Harshit was the find of the tournament last season. He claimed 19 scalps the previous season, and since then, his fortunes have changed as he got the cut in India's Test side. He could be the leader of the pace attack. Russell is another veteran pedigree. He picked 19 scalps last season at 15.63. He owns 115 wickets in the IPL.

2) With the addition of key bowlers, KKR's base is well-covered and has more character than last season. In spin, they got back the reliable Anukul Roy, who could be an impact player, especially on spin-friendly tracks. Mayank Markande seems a better fit than Suyash Sharma, who was released. Markande, with his leg spin, brings variety. He claimed 8 scalps from 7 games last season for SRH. The season before that, he managed 12 scalps for Mumbai. KKR also got an all-rounder in Mooen Ali, who did a reasonable job at Chennai Super Kings over the past few seasons. Mooen has played 363 T20 matches and owns over 240 wickets and over 7000 runs. In pace, KKR may have missed out on Starc, but they got Anrich Nortje, who has plenty of pace and depth on offer. He was the third-highest wicket-taker in the ICC T20 World Cup 2024. In the IPL, he owns 60 scalps from 46 games. Nortje is a natural replacement for Starc. Australia's Spencer Johnson, who was in top form in the recently concluded T20Is

against Pakistan, brings sheer pace and variations. He is tall and can extract bounce as well. KKR got back Vaibhav Arora, a key figure of the team over the last three seasons. He played 10 games last season and claimed 11 scalps. He could be a pivotal figure alongside Rana this season. KKR also roped in Umran Malik for a steal price and the fast bowler seems a solid acquisition who can lend top support from the bench. He didn't get the desired backing at SRH after impressing in IPL 2022 with 22 wickets from 14 games.

3) KKR's batting is well-settled. Narine will open alongside de Kock, who has a lot of experience up his sleeves. Both players will have the license to kill something Narine and Salt did last season. Rahmanullah Gurbaz, who has been a valuable asset for KKR across the previous 2 campaigns, can be a natural backup to de Kock. Gurbaz is a big match player, as seen last season when called up in the latter stages. Talented youngster Angriksh Raguvanshi has plenty of promise, as witnessed previous season. In Russell, Rinku, and Ramandeep, KKR have deadly finishers. A job done well for KKR when retaining. KKR also got Roman Powell, who can be the ideal back up to Russell. KKR have a top-notch bench with Manish Pandey bought back and former employee Ajinkya Rahane joining. Rahane was superb for CSK and can vie for a place alongside Raghuvanshi. Pandey brings value as an impact player. There is the solidity of Moeen as well.

KKR'S MAJOR WEAKNESS

KKR missed a trick by not going the distance for Shreyas, who went to PBKS for INR 26.75 crore. After missing out on Shreyas, KKR left midway in the bid for KL Rahul, who joined DC for 14 crore. With two captaincy options gone begging, KKR decided to spend heavily on Venkatesh. 23.75 crore on Venkatesh, who hasn't led in the IPL or at the state level, is a tricky territory. Venkatesh is the potential skipper of KKR, as he has been with the side for several seasons now, and another reason is his price tag. One feels KKR could

have utilized the Venkatesh money on Rahul and, with a chunk left, gone for someone like Starc, who was tremendous in Qualifier 1 and the IPL 2024 final. Venkatesh will now also need to be the force at number 4, replacing Shreyas in this batting order. Can he make the impact Shreyas had as a leader and a batter? We will need to wait and watch.

WHO CAN BE KKR'S IMPACT PLAYERS?

With the Impact Player rule, teams can name five substitutes and use one of them when needed. If four foreign players are already named in the XI, the impact player can only be an Indian. So KKR have work to do here and get the right call. Anukul Roy, Ajinkya Rahane, Manish Pandey, Vaibhav Arora, Mayank Markande.

PROBABLE KKR XI

Quinton de Kock (wk), Sunil Narine, Angriksh Raghuvanshi, Venkatesh Iyer (C), Rinku Singh, Andre Russell, Ramandeep Singh, Harshit Rana, Vaibhav Arora, Varun Chakravarthy, Anrich Nortje.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Sunil Narine: He was the MVP player last season, scoring 488 runs and taking 17 scalps. Notably, he struck at 180-plus. 281 of his runs came in the first six overs. He struck over 170. So, Narine's impact at the top could help KKR start well. He also took 14 wickets in overs 7-16 last season to be the cream asset in the middle overs. His ER of 6.15 during this phase was solid.

IPL 2025 SEASON: KKR WILL FINISH IN THE TOP 4

KKR need to execute what they did so well last season. With the majority of the same personnel on offer, KKR are well stocked and credit to the management for being smart. Chandrakant Pandit has worked closely with Venkatesh, and if the latter can showcase his credentials as a leader, this could be a trump card situation. If KKR are to finish in the top four and take it from there, Venkatesh will also need to deliver with the bat. ■

IPL 2025: 3 WEAKNESSES AND 2 STRENGTHS OF LUCKNOW SUPER GIANTS

LSG have a solid pace attack on offer with top Indian specialists. Mayank is such a pivotal figure in this side. Currently, the fastest Indian bowler, Mayank, impressed in the 4 games he played last season, taking 7 scalps at 12.14. A lot will revolve around him. In Mohsin, LSG get another solid customer...

ASTRAL PIPES
BKT
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BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Ahead of the auction, LSG had retained a total of 5 players. They kept hold of Ravi Bishnoi, Mohsin Khan, Mayank Yadav, Nicholas Pooran and Ayush Badoni. The Lucknow Super Giants made history at the Indian Premier League 2025 mega auction after getting hold of Team India star Rishabh Pant for Rs. 27 crore. LSG went head over heels for Pant after having released KL Rahul, who led the side for three seasons. Pant, who wasn't retained by the Delhi Capitals, saw a massive race unfold for him at the bidding table. LSG broke the record of Punjab Kings, who bought Shreyas Iyer for Rs. 26.75 crore at the same auction held in Jeddah.

Ahead of the auction, LSG had retained a total of 5 players. They kept hold of Ravi Bishnoi, Mohsin Khan, Mayank Yadav, Nicholas Pooran and Ayush Badoni. So, a basic structure of the team was already set as to how LSG wanted to go about things. The addition of Pant, who is set to lead the side, adds a lot of dimension. At the auction, LSG went out and signed more pacers to bolster the side. With Mohsin and Mayank already there, they further got the services of Akash Deep and used the RTM card for Avesh Khan. Having a solid core of Indian bowlers will allow LSG to field foreign specialists as batters. The likes of David Miller, Aidan Markram and Mitchell Marsh were all scooped up. LSG have a quality side at their disposal and they will hope to do well under the leadership of Pant.

Here we decode the strengths, weaknesses and key takeaways from the squad of LSG.

PLAYERS RETAINED BY LSG AHEAD OF THE AUCTION

Nicholas Pooran, Ravi Bishnoi, Mayank Yadav, Mohsin Khan, Ayush Badoni,

Players bought at the auction

Rishabh Pant (Rs. 27 crore), David Miller (Rs. 7.5 crore), Aiden Markram (Rs. 2 crore), Mitchell Marsh (Rs. 3.40 crore), Avesh Khan (Rs. 9.75 crore), Abdul Samad (Rs. 4.20 crore), Aryan Juyal (Rs. 30 lakh), Akash Deep (Rs. 8 crore), Himmat Singh (Rs. 30 lakh), M. Siddharth (Rs. 75 lakh), Digvesh Singh (Rs. 30 lakh), Shahbaz Ahmed (Rs. 2.40 crore), Akash Singh (Rs. 30 lakh), Shamar Joseph (Rs. 75 lakh), Prince Yadav (Rs. 30 lakh), Yuvraj

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Chaudhary (Rs. 30 lakh), Rajvardhan Hangargekar (Rs. 30 lakh), Arshin Kulkarni (Rs. 30 lakh), Matthew Breetzke (Rs. 75 lakh).

STRENGTHS OF LSG

LSG have a solid pace attack on offer with top Indian specialists. Mayank is such a pivotal figure in this side. Currently, the fastest Indian bowler, Mayank, impressed in the 4 games he played last season, taking 7 scalps at 12.14. A lot will revolve around him. In Mohsin, LSG get another solid customer. He will complement Mayank. Mohsin owns 27 scalps in the IPL. Senior bowler Avesh Khan was bought back by LSG. He adds pedigree at the death. He owns 74 wickets in the IPL at 26.67. Akash Deep, bought for Rs. 8 crore, provides stability as a backup. Mitchell Marsh can be used as a 4th pacer in the XI. The batting all-rounder possesses a lot of qualities. Shamar Joseph is the lone foreign pacer in the ranks. Overall, the pace unit looks solid, and if the bowlers can remain injury-free, LSG are in for a treat.

LSG have power when it comes to batting. You have the reliable Nicholas Pooran, who owns 1769 runs in the IPL at a strike rate worth 162-plus. Pooran is the match-winner for LSG. Pant comes in and elevates the side. This is the first time he will be playing for a different side, having represented Delhi in the IPL up till now. With 3284 runs in the IPL, Pant has plenty of experience riding. He had a stellar IPL 2024, scoring 446 runs. The young Ayush Badoni is someone LSG admire. He needs to step up and deliver for the franchise after showing glimpses of his abilities. In Miller and Marsh, LSH have two strong components. Miller can be the ideal finisher of this side. Marsh can come in as the opener and be explosive. There is Aiden Markram as well, who boasts plenty of experience. In Marsh, Markram, Pooran and Miller, LSG have four quality foreigners to lead the batting.

LSG have Delhi's Himmat Singh as a quality backup. He can be a nice addition in the middle order. Matthew Breetzke is another name in the mix. He owns impressive T20 numbers and is a wicketkeeper-batter.

WEAKNESSES OF LSG

The opening is an issue for Lucknow. Marsh is backed for the role but injuries and lack of form have hindered him in the IPL. Last season, Marsh managed just 61 runs from 4 matches at 15.25. LSG will need the star Aussie batter to deliver consistently. LSG could be forced to try Markram as an opener, given their dearth of openers. Markram can bat at several positions, but he hasn't been as consistent in the IPL as he would have liked. So despite these two being seasoned stars, one feels inconsistency could hit the side in this department. 23-year-old Aryan Juyal of UP is an

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opener alongside Breetzke. However, both haven't played in the IPL. LSG may have to turn up to these two if Markram and Marsh fail.

Spin bowling is an issue for the side. Bishnoi leads the attack and is the fulcrum but there is a feeling of a lack of proper support cast. Shahbaz Ahmed will be entrusted to back Bishnoi. However, Shahbaz had a poor IPL 2024 season, conceding at 9-plus and averaging 38-plus. In 55 IPL games, he has a paltry 21 scalps. M Siddarth is the side's third spinner. He has little experience in the IPL, having played just three games. Overall, the Tamil Nadu spinner boasts impressive numbers across formats in his career, but he may not get the desired number of matches with Ahmed being in the mix.

Abdul Samad got lucky to fetch a bid as high as Rs. 4.50 crore. A product from the Orange Army, Samad has hardly done anything to justify his price tag and also his whereabouts in the IPL. He scored 182 runs in IPL 2024 at 18.20. SRH didn't retain him. He is considered a finisher in the ranks, but his overall strike rate of 146.07 doesn't do justice and an average of 19.23 highlights he cannot be counted either. Notably, Samad could be used as an impact player for his finishing tag, but his presence is a definite weakness.

PROBABLE PLAYING XI OF LSG

Mitchell Marsh, Aiden Markram, Nicholas Pooran, Rishabh Pant (c and wk), Ayush Badoni, David Miller, Shahbaz Ahmed, Ravi Bishnoi, Mayank Yadav, Avesh Khan, Mohsin Khan.

WHO CAN BE THE IMPACT PLAYERS?

If LSG bat first, someone like Himmat Singh or Abdul Samad can be in the mix. And when they bowl, a pacer can come in place. If LSG bowl first, the above-mentioned side is their best-balanced XI. Someone like Himmat and Samad can come in depending on the run-chase later on.

KEY PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR?

Nicholas Pooran: Pooran was retained by LSG, and he remains the X-factor. Across 29 matches for LSG, Pooran owns 857 runs at an impressive 42-plus. His strike rate is a mouthwatering 175.97. He has 5 fifties for Lucknow in the IPL. Overall in T20s, Pooran has bagged a whopping 8320 runs with 48 fifties and three tons.

LUCKNOW WILL BE IN THE MIX FOR THE TOP 4

Lucknow will be one of the sides fighting for a berth in the top 4. They have a strong side, but a few holes are present, especially in spin and depth on the bench in batting. If LSG are to shine, Pant and Pooran remain key for the franchise. ■

IPL 2025: DECODING 3 MAJOR STRENGTHS AND 1 WEAKNESS OF GUJARAT TITANS

In IPL 2025, we could see more of Washington Sundar, who perhaps didn't get the desired games in his former franchises. Sundar has a strong economy rate of 6.96 in T20s. Given his recent exploits with Team India, Sundar can be a good option in the ranks supporting Rashid. Domestic star Sai Kishore....

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

After a disappointing Indian Premier League 2024 season, Gujarat Titans, under the leadership of Shubman Gill, will be hoping to come out trumps in IPL 2025. GT went on to get hold of several quality players in the mega auction held on November 26 and 27, respectively, in Jeddah. Before that, they retained 5 players. Overall, GT are an interesting side with quality players in the ranks. One expects the Titans to do a reasonable job in the upcoming season. GT's retention of Gill, Sai Sudharsan, Rashid Khan, and Rahul Tewatia was no surprise. The only retention that did surprise was Shahrukh Khan, who has been more of style than substance. However, GT had different ideas. At the auction, the solid buys for GT were the likes of Jos Buttler and Kagiso Rabada for a handsome chunk of money. A lot of money was also spent on acquiring Indian pacers Mohammed Siraj and Prasidh Krishna. Some valuable foreign names, such as Gerald Coetzee, Glenn Phillips, and Karim Janat, were added.

GT have most of their bases covered, and this looks well for the 2022 champions. Ahead of the IPL 2025 season, we decode the strengths, weaknesses, and takeaways of the Titans.

RETAINED PLAYERS LIST OF GT: Rashid Khan (Rs. 18 crore), Shubman Gill (Rs. 16.5 crore), Sai Sudharsan (Rs. 8.5 crore), Rahul Tewatia (Rs. 4 crore), Shahrukh Khan (Rs. 4 crore).

IPL 2025 SQUAD OF THE TITANS: Kagiso Rabada (Rs. 10.75 crore), Jos Buttler (Rs. 15.75 crore). Mohammed Siraj (Rs. 12.25 crore), Prasidh Krishna (Rs. 9.50 crore), Nishant Sindhu (Rs. 30 lakh), Mahipal Lomror (Rs. 1.70 crore), Kumar Kushagra (Rs. 65 lakh), Anuj Rawat (Rs. 30 lakh), Manav Suthar (Rs. 30 lakh), Washington Sundar (Rs. 3.20 crore), Gerald Coetzee (Rs. 2.40 crore), Arshad Khan (Rs. 1.30 crore), Gurnoor Brar (Rs. 1.30 crore), Sherfane Rutherford (Rs. 2.60 crore), Sai Kishore (Rs. 2 crore), Ishant Sharma (Rs. 75 lakh), Jayant Yadav

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(Rs. 75 lakh), Glenn Phillips (Rs. 2 crore), Karim Janat (Rs. 75 lakh), Kulwant Khejroliya (Rs. 30 lakh).

STRENGTHS OF GT

GT have perhaps the best front three in batting. Gill and Sudharsan were a treat to watch last season. He smashed a terrific 527 runs from 12 matches last season at 47.90. Skipper Gill also scored in excess of 400 runs. Both players slammed a ton each. Gill, who hit 890 runs in IPL 2023, remains a solid force. With over 3200 runs in the IPL, Gill has already smashed 4 hundreds and 20 fifties. In Buttler, GT get a real force. A champion T20 performer, Buttler owns close to 12000 runs with 8 tons and 83 fifties. He owns over 500 sixes in T20s (509). GT could tear teams apart with the consistency and aggression these players hold at the top three. So one expects GT to get strong starts more than often. GT's spin attack is well-drilled. Rashid is the leading spinner with 615 scalps in 449 T20 matches. His average of 18.13 and economy rate of 6.48 make him the match-winning asset. In the IPL, Rashid has 149 scalps from 121 matches. He is one of the best performers in the middle overs.

In IPL 2025, we could see more of Washington Sundar, who perhaps didn't get the desired games in his former franchises. Sundar has a strong economy rate of 6.96 in T20s. Given his recent exploits with Team India, Sundar can be a good option in the ranks supporting Rashid. Domestic star Sai Kishore has promising numbers in T20s with an economy rate of 5.92 and an average of 18.53. Kishore will hope he gets more opportunities in IPL 2025. He has played only 10 IPL games to date.

Glenn Phillips has improved vastly with his spin inputs. He can chip in a few overs if needed. Tewatia can also lend his voice. GT have backups in another seasoned campaigner, Jayant Yadav, as well. The third major strength of GT is their variety in pace. Rabada will lead the line for the Titans. In 211 T20s, Rabada has 264 wickets under his belt at 23.55. He is a valuable asset in the final 4 overs, averaging 17.12 and owning 106 scalps. Gerald Coetzee is an able backup. In 64 T20s, he has 86 scalps at 21.56. The South African duo can be a good mix. Batting all-rounder Karim Janat adds variety in the ranks. He is a star player who could be used extensively. The medium pacer owns 117 scalps at 27.70. With close to 2500 T20 runs, the Afghan sensation fills in as a proper all-round force.

Among Indians, Siraj and Krishna make it to the XI. Siraj will have a point to prove after being released by RCB. Krishna, who has battled injuries of late, will be

keen for a sound return. He last played in IPL 2022, taking 19 scalps for Rajasthan Royals. Siraj picked 19 and 15 scalps in his last 2 IPL campaigns. In Ishant Sharma and Manav Suthar, GT have able backups who can contribute toward the team's success.

WEAKNESSES OF GT

GT have a strong batting order and they bat deep, however, there is a lack of backup players especially in Indian ranks. As mentioned, Shahrukh is more style than substance. If he fails to deliver, GT will need to rely on inconsistent IPL performers like Mahipal Lomror and Anuj Rawat. Lomror, who has 2137 runs in T20s, has struggled in the IPL, averaging 18 and striking at 141-plus. Rawat's strike rate in the IPL is a poor 119.10. His average of 19.87 doesn't help as well. Kumar Kushagra, with just 254 runs from 20 T20 innings, is a struggle. He scored three runs in the IPL last season from 4 matches.

GT PROBABLE PLAYING XI: **Jos Buttler, Shubman Gill, Sai Sudharsan, Glenn Phillips, Shahrukh Khan, Washington Sundar, Rahul Tewatia, Rashid Khan, Mohammed Siraj, Kagiso Rabada, Prasidh Krishna.**

WHO CAN BE THE IMPACT PLAYERS FOR GT?

GT bat deep, so they can pick bowlers to add more variety as Impact players. So, for example, someone like Sai Kishore can be drafted in as the third spinner for middle order batter Mahipal Lomror. If GT need an extra cushion in batting, Anuj Rawat could be an option in the ranks.

KEY PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Jos Buttler: The Englishman scored an impressive 359 runs at 39.88 in IPL 2024, having smacked two centuries for RR. He smoked centuries against Kolkata Knight Riders and Royal Challengers Bengaluru, becoming the first batter with over two centuries in IPL run-chases. In 83 matches for RR, Buttler slammed a terrific 3055 runs at 41.84. He smashed 7 tons and 18 fifties. Overall, he owns over 3500 runs in the IPL.

IPL 2025: GT WILL CHALLENGE FOR A TOP 4 BERTH

GT have a strong, experienced core of foreign players. From Buttler and Phillips to Janat and Sherfane Rutherford, this is an able batting force. Rabada and Coetzee are able to take the ball alongside spin wizard Rashid. GT also have several interesting Indian names who form the starting XI. Overall, this is a side that has a blend to it. One will feel GT have the required power to challenge for a top-four berth. ■

IPL 2025: 3 MAJOR STRENGTHS AND 2 WEAKNESSES OF SUNRISERS HYDERABAD

SRH won their only IPL title in 2016 and is awaiting to add to the tally. Last season, they were second best against a well-drilled KKR side both in Qualifier 1 and then in the final. Many will feel that SRH could take a step further this time, given the balance. Also, they have a skipper in Cummins who is one of the best in the business...

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BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Sunrisers Hyderabad reached the Indian Premier League 2024 season final but couldn't take the leap. This time around, the Pat Cummins-led side would like to push for the coveted IPL trophy after bolstering their squad with some massive names during the IPL auction 2025 in Jeddah. SRH went on to retain some of their key performers before taking in settled names at the auction. Before the auction, SRH made a smart move by retaining five key players: Cummins, Abhishek Sharma, Travis Head, Nitish Kumar Reddy, and Heinrich Klaasen. So, you already have five quality names in the starting XI. At the auction, they did well to get Ishan Kishan. In bowling, it's a new-look unit with some star names from last season not gone after. The arrivals of Mohammed Shami and Harshal Patel make SRH powerful.

SRH won their only IPL title in 2016 and is awaiting to add to the tally. Last season, they were second best against a well-drilled KKR side both in Qualifier 1 and then in the final. Many will feel that SRH could take a step further this time, given the balance. Also, they have a skipper in Cummins who is one of the best in the business. SRH have 20 players in their squad out of a maximum of 25. They also have gone with 7 foreigners out of 8 slots. With the IPL 2025 auction over, we present the SRH squad's strengths, weaknesses, and takeaways.

SRH'S SQUAD FOR THE IPL 2025 SEASON

The SRH retained players list includes Pat Cummins (Rs. 18 crore), Abhishek Sharma (Rs. 14 crore), Nitish Reddy (Rs. 6 crore), Heinrich Klaasen (Rs. 23 crore), and Travis Head (Rs. 14 crore).

PLAYERS BOUGHT: Mohammed Shami (Rs. 10 crore), Harshal Patel (Rs. 8 crore), Ishan Kishan (Rs. 11.25 crore), Rahul Chahar (Rs. 3.2 crore), Adam Zampa (Rs. 2.40 crore), Atharva Taide (Rs. 30 lakh), Abhinav Manohar (Rs. 3.20 crore), Simarjeet Singh (Rs. 1.50 crore), Zeeshan Ansari (Rs. 40 lakh), Jaydev Unadkat (Rs. 1 crore), Brydon Carse (Rs. 1 crore), Kamindu Mendis (Rs. 75 lakh), Aniket Verma (Rs. 30 lakh), Eshan Malinga (Rs. 1.20 crore), Sachin Baby (Rs. 30 lakh).

WHAT ARE THE 3 MAJOR STRENGTHS?

The likes of Head and Abhishek form the most deadly opening combination, as seen last year when they tore apart sides and scored at will. In 16 matches, Abhishek scored 484 runs at 32.26 last season. His strike rate was 204.21. Head managed 567 runs from 15 matches. His strike rate was 191.55. He averaged 40.50. As per ESPNcricinfo, Head scored 402 of his runs in the power play and struck at 208.29. Abhishek managed 343 runs in this phase and struck at 202.95. So you

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have the base to continue in this fashion and take the opposition team to the cleaners from the word go. Their understanding will be pivotal once again.

Kishan comes in and provides more fluidity in the ranks. Like Head and Abhishek, Kishan can be aggressive, and score quality runs at a brisk pace. Kishan scored 320 runs for Mumbai Indians last season, striking at 148.83. Ideally an opener, Kishan will likely come in at number four as he, too, is a left-handed batter. So SRH could fit someone like Kerala's Sachin Baby in between. Baby has performed well in the ongoing Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy. Like Kishan, he can bat at several positions. Baby owns 1882 runs in SMAT and has a strike rate worth 132-plus. There is also Atharva Taide, who played for Punjab Kings. In Klaasen and Reddy, you get your ideal number five and six. Nitish has done an able job in T20s since making his debut in 2021. He owns 485 runs at 32.33. Klaasen is the big man and the match-winning finisher. He has close to 5000 T20 runs. In IPL 2024, he managed 479 runs (SR: 171.07). There is Sri Lanka's Kamindu Mendis in the mix as well.

SRH have a dream pace attack. Cummins leads the show with veteran Shami helping him out. Australia's Cummins impressed with 18 scalps last season and was a consistent force. And with Shami coming in, the bowling receives a boost. The Bengal pacer has 127 IPL scalps at 26.86. Shami has been bowling at full tilt since coming back from an injury. He missed IPL 2024, and in 2023, he picked 28 scalps for the Gujarat Titans. And then you have Harshal Patel. Notably, he is a two-time Purple Cap winner, having won the award in 2021 as well with RCB. He picked 32 scalps in IPL 2021 and ended with 99 scalps for RCB in 80 matches. In IPL 2024 for Punjab, he took 24 scalps from 14 games at 19.87. SRH's depth in pace looks sorted. Jaydev Unadkat lends a voice alongside newcomer Brydon Carse. Eshan Malinga and Simarjeet Singh.

WHAT ARE THE 2 WEAKNESSES?

SRH shelled out a whopping INR 3.2 crore on 30-year-old Abhinav Manohar. He could be used as an impact player. However, one hopes that Manohar doesn't turn out to be similar to Abdul Samad, who made more noise and less substance. Manohar owns a modest 670 runs from 31 innings in T20s. His strike rate is 149. He played just two games for GT last season, scoring nine runs. Manohar adds to the

finishing ranks for SRH and could come in at seven as an impact player. But will he deliver?

SRH's spin attack is stronger than last season. Rahul Chahar will walk into the side, and Aussie star Adam Zampa can complement the Indian bowler. However, if SRH plans to keep Zampa on the bench, then there is a lack of a frontline spinner. Zeeshan Ansari has yet to play T20 cricket. Apart from Ansari, SRH does not have a spinner. So this is one department where SRH could lack, given any injury woes.

PROBABLE PLAYING XI OF SRH

Abhishek Sharma, Travis Head, Sachin Baby, Ishan Kishan, Heinrich Klaasen (wk), Nitish Reddy, Pat Cummins (c), Rahul Chahar, Adam Zampa, Mohammed Shami, Harshal Patel.

WHO CAN BE SRH'S IMPACT PLAYERS?

With the Impact Player rule, teams can name five substitutes and use one of them when needed. If four foreign players are already named in the XI, the impact player can only be an Indian. SRH's best balance is the above-mentioned starting XI owing to the resources. So if they bat first, Manohar will fit in. And then, during bowling, he could be replaced by someone like a Chahar. Other players in the mix are Taide, Unadkat, and Baby.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

HEINRICH KLAASEN: South African ace Klaasen scored a crucial 448 runs from 12 matches (11 innings) in IPL 2023. His strike rate was a whopping 177.07, and he averaged close to 50. He backed the numbers up with another solid season in IPL 2024. So you get a strong-minded asset on the side who can be the game changer.

IPL 2025 SEASON: SRH COULD MAKE IT TO THE PLAYOFFS

SRH won't make many changes and will rely on their main XI to help them deliver. Reddy will be the 4th seamer in the side with a world-class attack in Shami, Cummins, and Harshal. Unadkat, Carse, and Eshan can contribute when called upon. And then with Chahar and Zampa, you can get quality overs of spin. The batting is SRH's major strength. You have 5 powerful performers on the side. Utility names in Baby and Taide could play supporting roles. One feels SRH can make it to the last 4. ■

IPL 2025: 2 STRENGTHS AND 2 MAJOR WEAKNESSES OF DELHI CAPITALS

The pace attack of DC is a real deal. Starc is a bigmatch player, and we witnessed that last season when he helped the Kolkata Knight Riders in vQualifier 1 and then the final. He picked 14 wickets last season for KKR. In Natarajan, DC get a proven customer in the IPL...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Delhi Capitals have one of the most interesting squads in the Indian Premier League 2025. After having let Rishabh Pant go and missing out on Shreyas Iyer at the IPL 2025 mega auction in Jeddah, the Capitals got hold of KL Rahul for a bargain of Rs. 14 crore. He comes into the side after having played for Punjab Kings and Lucknow Super Giants over the last six seasons. Rahul will lead DC, and he has the experience under his belt to aid the franchise. He led LSG to two playoffs in three seasons. DC have a character in their ranks, and this season, one expects them to perform well and be a thorn for opposition teams. Ahead of the auction, DC retained four players: Kuldeep Yadav, Axar Patel, Tristan Stubbs, and Abishek Morel. At the auction, they built a strong bowling unit especially in pace. Mitchell Starc was captured alongside the likes of Mohit Sharma, Mukesh Kumar, and T Natarajan. For back-ups, Dushmantha Chameera makes his presence felt.

DC also have powerful names in their batting. Jake Fraser-McGurk saw the side use the RTM card for him. Harry Brook and Faf du Plessis were roped in as well. Donovan Ferreira provides an option from the bench. They also made a smart move by signing big-hitter Ashutosh Sharma, who impressed largely for PBKS last season. Ahead of the IPL 2025 season, we decode the strengths, weaknesses, and takeaways of the DC squad.

PLAYERS RETAINED BY DC: **Axar Patel (Rs. 16.5 crore), Kuldeep Yadav (Rs. 13.25 crore), Tristan Stubbs (Rs. 10 crore), Abishek Porel (Rs. 4 crore).**

Players bought at the auction: Mitchell Starc (Rs. 11.75 crore), KL Rahul (Rs. 14 crore), Harry Brook (Rs. 6.25 crore), Jake Fraser-McGurk (Rs. 9 crore), T. Natarajan (Rs. 10.75 crore), Karun Nair (Rs. 50 lakh), Sameer Rizvi (Rs. 95 lakh), Ashutosh Sharma (Rs. 3.80 crore), Mohit Sharma (Rs. 2.20 crore), Faf du Plessis (Rs. 2 crore), Mukesh Kumar (Rs. 8 crore), Darshan Nalkande (Rs. 30 lakh), Vipraj Nigam (Rs. 50 lakh), Dushmantha Chameera (Rs. 75 lakh), Donovan Ferreira (Rs. 75 lakh), Ajay Mandal (Rs. 30 lakh), Manvanth Kumar (Rs. 30 lakh), Tripurana Vijay (Rs. 30 lakh), Madhav Tiwari (Rs. 40 lakh).

STRENGTHS OF DELHI CAPITALS

DC have the desired character in batting. Fraser-McGurk is expected to open alongside Abishek Porel with KL Rahul coming at number three. Fraser-McGurk impressed largely in the nine matches he played for DC last season. He struck at a stupendous 234.04 and scored 330 runs at 36.66. He is someone who can set the power play on fire. 266 of his runs came in the first six overs at a strike rate of 250.94. He averaged a solid 53.20. Porel is someone who has enhanced his reputation. He had an excellent 2024 Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy for Bengal, scoring 335 runs at 41.87. He struck at 158-plus and hit three fifties. Porel also did well in IPL 2024 before that, amassing 327 runs from 12 innings with a strike rate worth close to 160. DC will want Porel to open, given he is enjoying this role. He can also set the tone.

Rahul will need to come at number three for the sake

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of the side. In 132 IPL games, Rahul owns 4683 runs at 45-plus average. His tally includes four tons and 37 fifties. His strike rate is 134.60. Across three seasons with Lucknow, Rahul managed 1410 runs at 41.47. Before that, he was with the Punjab Kings, scoring 2548 runs at a solid 56.62. DC get bolstered by the arrival of Brook. In 144 T20s, he has 3358 runs at a healthy average of 33.58 and a strike rate worth 150-plus. However, Brook will need to come out at either four or number five to accommodate substantial positions that favor batters.

South Africa's Tristan Stubbs is next. He scored at a strike rate of 190.90 last season, and his average read 54. He scored 378 runs. Stubbs is a massive middle-order batter and boasts pedigree. In Ashutosh, DC get a promising finisher in the ranks alongside Axar.

Faf du Plessis adds character from the bench, and his quality is spellbound. Given the look of DC, the former RCB skipper may have to sit out and perhaps be ready when needed. Similarly, Ferreira is also a viable option. He has a strike rate of 158.64 and owns 1615 runs.

The pace attack of DC is a real deal. Starc is a big-match player, and we witnessed that last season when he helped the Kolkata Knight Riders in Qualifier 1 and then the final. He picked 14 wickets last season for KKR. In Natarajan, DC get a proven customer in the IPL. He was one of the key assets for SRH last season, picking 19 scalps at 24.47. He is a superb bowler at the death. 11 of his scalps came in the last 4 overs in IPL 2024 at just 14.90. In 10 matches for DC last season, pacer Mukesh was on song, taking 17 scalps at 21.64. He will want to stick to his role and deliver. In Mohit, DC get a veteran, who did a reasonable job for Gujarat Titans of late. In 25 innings, he picked 40 scalps for GT at 19.65. On the bench, Darshan Nalkande is an interesting figure. He averages 17.41 in T20s.

WEAKNESSES OF DELHI CAPITALS

DC need to use Porel as an opener if they don't do that, he gets wasted. The problem with Rahul is that he lacks the intent at the top and plays the long game. His

best position, therefore, is number three. Rahul has batted mainly as an opener for both PBKS and LSG. This could be a big ask for DC to get the right balance. With Porel, Fraser-McGurk, and Rahul forming the top three, DC will also be forced to play Harry Brook at number four. He is more of a top-order batter. So will Brook come out and bring the impact if asked to bat down remains a question. DC are over reliant on spinners Axar and Kuldeep. Both are solid players, but where are the backups? 20-year-old uncapped Vipraj Nigam has played just 7 T20 games. DC will need to rely on all-rounder Ajay Mandal. He owns 44 scalps in T20s but hasn't played in the IPL. Moreover, Mandal is also a left-arm spinner. So you have three left-arm spinners and a rookie right-arm spinner. It's an area where DC will struggle. In every match they cannot just rely on Kuldeep and Axar.

DC PROBABLE PLAYING XI: Jake Fraser-McGurk, Abishek Porel, KL Rahul (c & wk), Harry Brook, Tristan Stubbs, Axar Patel, Ashutosh Sharma, Kuldeep Yadav, Mitchell Starc, Mukesh Kumar, T Natarajan.

WHO CAN BE THE IMPACT PLAYERS FOR DC?

DC need a sixth bowler and especially a spin option. So Mandal is the player who can come in as the Impact Player for someone like Porel; if they need a fourth pacer, Nalkande, as an all-rounder, can make the cut. In terms of an extra batter, Karun Nair is the obvious choice.

KEY PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Kuldeep Yadav: The left-arm wrist-spinner owns 200 T20 scalps from 161 games at 21.35. Kuldeep impressed last season for DC, taking 16 scalps at 23.25.

IPL 2025: DC WILL CHALLENGE FOR A TOP 4 BERTH

DC need to get their balance right in terms of batting positions. If things click for them, then a top 4 berth is all likely. They get an able skipper in Rahul, and the pace unit, in particular, is serious. The batting has the ingredients to come good as well. ■

IPL 2025: 2 STRENGTHS AND 2 WEAKNESSES OF RAJASTHAN ROYALS

Batting is RR's second major strength. In Samson and Jaiswal, RR get a strong combination to tear opposition sides apart. Samson is highly experienced, with over 7,200 runs in T20s. He has smashed six tons. Jaiswal is the present and future of both RR and Team India. Former KKR ace Nitish Rana...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

The Royals retained the joint-most players ahead of the mega auction alongside Kolkata Knight Riders (6). Rajasthan Royals will be out to showcase their royalty in the upcoming 2025 edition of the Indian Premier League (IPL). The Royals retained the joint-most players ahead of the mega auction alongside Kolkata Knight Riders (6). Sanju Samson will lead the side, and one would see him open, given he is doing that now for Team India in T20Is and going well. Yashasvi Jaiswal, Riyan Parag, Dhruv Jurel, Sandeep Sharma, and Shimron Hetmyer were retained as well. So you get an ideal six already in the playing XI.

However, surprisingly the Royals let go of several star names. Not holding Yuzvendra Chahal was a surprise to all. He is already RR's top wicket-taker, having played for them for three seasons (2022-24). Similarly, Jos Buttler was another player they let go of alongside Trent Boult. RR will hope this won't come back to bite them.

The mega auction in Jeddah saw the Royals get Sri Lankan spinners Wanindu Hasaranga and Mahesh Theekshana. By the look of things, they would be an integral part of the side and lead the spin show. Former pacer Jofra Archer was roped in for a whopping INR 12.50 crore. He fits in straight away and will lead the pace battery. RR also did well to get Indian customers in Nitish Rana and Tushar Deshpande. These additions highlight RR have a capable side to attack and go about

their business. RR, who have former Team India coach Rahul Dravid at the helm, went bold by signing the youngest player in IPL history. They made history in securing 13-year-old Vaibhav Suryavanshi. He is a bright talent who could be in the same mold as Yashasvi Jaiswal. RR also went for some decent uncapped Indian players. However, the side has its main XI sorted and will go with purpose under Samson.

Ahead of the IPL 2025 season, we decode the strengths, weaknesses, and takeaways of RR.

RR'S SQUAD FOR THE IPL 2025 SEASON

Retained players ahead of the auction: Sanju Samson (Rs. 18 crore), Yashasvi Jaiswal (Rs. 18 crore), Riyan Parag (Rs. 14 crore), Dhruv Jurel (Rs. 14 crore), Shimron Hetmyer (Rs. 11 crore) and Sandeep Sharma (Rs. 4 crore)

Players bought: Jofra Archer (Rs. 12.50 crore), Maheesh Theekshana (Rs. 4.4 crore), Wanindu Hasaranga (Rs. 5.25 crore), Akash Madhwal (Rs. 1.20 crore), Kumar Kartikeya (Rs. 30 lakh), Nitish Rana (Rs. 4.20 crore), Tushar Deshpande (Rs. 6.50 crore), Shubham Dubey (Rs. 80 lakh), Yudhvir Singh (Rs. 35 lakh), Fazalhaq Farooqi (Rs. 2 crore), Vaibhav Suryavanshi (Rs. 1.10 crore), Kwena Maphaka (Rs. 1.50 crore), Kunal Rathore (Rs. 30 lakh), Ashok Sharma (Rs. 30 lakh).

THREE MAJOR STRENGTHS OF RR

RR's bowling is sturdy and has a nice blend,

especially when it comes to the main components. Sandeep has plenty of experience under his belt, and RR seess him as someone who can guide the youngsters. With 137 IPL scalps under his belt, Sandeep did a reasonable job last season, taking 13 scalps. Sandeep is effective both in the power play and final four overs. Archer's pace and variations will help RR. He did a reasonable job earlier with the franchise. Archer, who has made a sound return to cricket from injury, owns 48 IPL scalps. He is seen to bring the impact Boult had across the last few years with the side. RR's smart buy in Deshpande is notable. In 13 matches last season for Chennai Super Kings, Deshpande managed 17 wickets. The right-arm pacer has 42 scalps in total in the IPL.

Fazalhaq Farooqi is a real asset in this side. He is a solid replacement for Archer, who can be rested keeping his fitness in mind in between. With an average of 19.09 and an economy rate of just 6.94, Farooqi is a stable T20 warrior in the ranks. Similarly, in spin, Kumar Kartikeya brings capabilities as a proven domestic star. He averages 19.91 in T20s.

Wanindu Hasaranga was one of the steals in the IPL 2025 auction. He can safely be said as the top two spinners in T20 cricket at the moment. One of the consistent sides, RR, perhaps look at Hasaranga, who can fill in the shoes of Chahal for the next three seasons. Hasaranga brings plenty to the RR side with his offerings as a leg-spinner. In 200 T20 matches, he has 287 scalps under his belt at 16.65. His economy rate is just 6.90. Hasaranga, who played for RCB earlier in the IPL, owns 35 scalps from 26 games at 21.37.

Theekshana is someone who is also a reliable personality. In 178 T20s, he has 189 scalps under his belt. His understanding of Hasaranga will aid the Royals.

Batting is RR's second major strength. In Samson and Jaiswal, RR get a strong combination to tear opposition sides apart. Samson is highly experienced, with over 7,200 runs in T20s. He has smashed six tons. Jaiswal is the present and future of both RR and Team India. Former KKR ace Nitish Rana will be slotted in at number three. A solid player of spin, the southpaw brings a lot of pedigree. Riyan Parag got his due, and the trust RR have in him is immense. 2024 was Parag's payback time in the IPL for RR. He smashed a staggering 573 runs at 52.09.

In Dhruv Jurel and Shimron Hetmyer, RR have the desired batters to be the finishers of the side and also hold credibility in the middle order. These two talents are a bonus for any side. Meanwhile, Shubham Dubey adds vitality from the bench. He averages over 35 in T20s and has a strike rate of close to 150.

RR'S MAJOR WEAKNESS

RR lack credibility in terms of backups. Yes, Dubey, Kartikeya, and Farooqi are able names, but barring these, the side lacks depth. Akash Madhwal took just five scalps from five matches in IPL 2024 for MI at 41. His economy rate was poor (11-plus). Teenager Kwena Maphaka played only 2 games for MI, and he averaged 89 and had an ER of 14.83. Yudhvir Singh and Ashok Sharma are the other uncapped pacers in the mix. Yudhvir has limited experience in T20s and averages 33-plus. Ashok is yet to make his debut in domestic cricket. At 22 years old, he seems a wasted talent who is more suited as a net bowler. So RR are running on thin ice when it comes to pace options. If Sandeep or Deshpande suffer injuries or are out of form, RR are destined to struggle. In batting, too, RR's bench is not up to the mark. Dubey has never played in the IPL. 13-year-old Vaibhav is a raw deal. When it comes to playing international stars, he is far away and could struggle. Also, Kunal Rathore hasn't played in the IPL and is inexperienced. RR's batting, apart from the main XI, looks weak.

WHO CAN BE RR'S IMPACT PLAYERS?

With the Impact Player rule, teams can name five substitutes and use one of them when needed. If four foreign players are already named in the XI, the impact player can only be an Indian. So RR have work to do here and get the right call. Kartikeya seems the ideal choice as an impact player. He can be the sixth option for RR in bowling. Madhwal can also be thrown into the mix as a 4th pace option.

PROBABLE RR XI

Sanju Samson (c and wk), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Nitish Rana, Riyan Parag, Dhruv Jurel, Shimron Hetmyer, Wanindu Hasaranga, Maheesh Theekshana, Jofra Archer, Tushar Deshpande, Sandeep Sharma.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Sanju Samson: If RR are to shine, skipper Samson holds the key. In 16 matches last season, Samson scored a credible 531 runs in the IPL. Samson owns 4419 runs in the IPL and owns over 200 sixes. Samson can be seen as a responsible figure who has finally come to his fore, He owns three T20I tons and all of them have come in 2024 alongside a fifty.

IPL 2025 SEASON: RR TO MISS OUT ON TOP 4

RR lack the strengths, having let go of names such as Boult, Buttler, and Chahal. They have a decent XI, which can do well but there is a lack of character in batting with poor bench strength. Similarly, no good pace options in the Indian ranks is another major blow. This side needs a fixed XI and an impact player to make amends, but the overall structure is a miss. ■

IPL 2025: 3 STRENGTHS AND 2 MAJOR WEAKNESSES OF ROYAL CHALLENGERS BENGALURU

Spin is RCB's main weakness. They are heavily reliant on bowling all-rounder Krunal Pandya. Notably, Pandya wasdismal last season, averaging 42.50 and taking six wickets from 14 matches. The season before that, he picked nine scalps at 34.77...

EXIDE
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ROYAL CHALLENGERS

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Royal Challengers Bengaluru are still awaiting their maiden Indian Premier League crown, and 2025 is once again a vital season for the side. In four of the last 5 seasons, RCB have reached the playoffs before faltering. Building on this, RCB will be keen to go strong and long. The IPL 2025 auction in Jeddah on November 25 and 26, respectively, saw RCB assemble a decent squad. There were a few hits and misses in terms of recruitment but the Challengers will feel they have the resources to come good.

RCB, who moved away from skipper Faf du Plessis, are all set to return to Virat Kohli to take up the reins once again. This is after they failed to land captaincy options at the auction. Many would feel RCB not going the distance for KL Rahul was a blip. Similarly, the side didn't go for former spin ace Yuzvendra Chahal, who moved to Punjab after being released by Rajasthan Royals. The biggest surprise was them not using RTM for Will Jacks. He ended up as a bargain buy for the Mumbai Indians. RCB are once again a side that has plenty of new faces. So, once again, it's a start from scratch. It remains to be seen how Kohli can get this side to perform consistently and deliver results. Here, we present the strengths, weaknesses, and takeaways from the RCB IPL 2025 squad.

RCB retained just three players ahead of the auction and then bought 19 players over 2 days. Notably, their two RTM cards were left unused.

RCB RETAINED PLAYERS LIST: Virat Kohli (Rs. 21 crore), Rajat Patidar (Rs. 11 crore), Yash Dayal (Rs. 5 crore).

Players bought at the auction: Liam Livingstone (Rs. 8.75 crore), Phil Salt (Rs. 11.50 crore), Jitesh Sharma (Rs. 11 crore), Josh Hazlewood (Rs. 12.50 crore), Rasikh Dar (Rs. 6 crore), Suyash Sharma (Rs. 2.60 crore), Krunal Pandya (Rs. 5.75 crore), Bhuvneshwar Kumar (Rs. 10.75 crore), Swapnil Singh (Rs. 50 lakh), Tim David (Rs. 3 crore), Romario Shepherd (Rs. 1.50 crore), Nuwan Thushara (Rs. 1.60 crore), Manoj Bhandage (Rs. 30 lakh), Jacob Bethell (Rs. 2.60 crore), Devdutt Padikkal (Rs. 2 crore), Swastik Chhikara (Rs. 30 lakh), Lungi Ngidi (Rs. 1 crore), Abhinandan Singh (Rs. 30 lakh), Mohit Rathee (Rs. 30 lakh).

STRENGTHS OF RCB

Batting is RCB's strength this season and they can count upon what looks like a promising unit. RCB's bases are covered from top to finishers. What RCB did well was to get Phil Salt. He was a revelation for Kolkata Knight Riders last season. He smashed a total of 435 runs from 12 innings at a strike rate worth 182.

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RCB can expect fast starts this season with Salt being at the helm of matters. Salt will open alongside Kohli, and the two could form a deadly combination. Kohli smashed a record 741 runs last season at 61.75. The opening pair can complement each other.

Patidar is another massive figure who can bat at three or number four. He can be the fulcrum of the side. Last season, he managed 395 runs for the side (SR: 177.13). England's Liam Livingstone is a massive figure at number 5 with his big-hitting prowess. Jitesh Sharma, Krunal Pandya and Tim David are the finishers the side boasts of.On the bench, Jacob Bethell is the one who can make a lot of impact. He is one of the players to watch out for this season. Another strength of RCB is Kohli returning as captain. He owns the third-most matches as captain in the tourney, having managed in 143 games. He has won 66, lost 70 and tied three (NR: 4). His win percentage reads 46.15. Kohli, who has been a one-team man in the IPL, will be raring to bring his passion and A game into play in order to help the team deliver.

RCB's main-pace attack is solid, with Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Yash Dayal, and Josh Hazlewood in the mix. Bhuvi will bring his experience into play, being effective. He owns 181 IPL wickets. Hazlewood will offer substance as well. He owns 35 IPL scalps from 27 games with a neat average of 23-plus. Left-arm pacer Dayal, who took 15 scalps for RCB last season, is a strong asset. On the bench, Nuwan Thusara and Lungi Ngidi are notable figures who can step in if Hazlewood gets rested or injured.

WEAKNESSES OF RCB

Spin is RCB's main weakness. They are heavily reliant on bowling all-rounder Krunal Pandya. Notably, Pandya was dismal last season, averaging 42.50 and taking six wickets from 14 matches. The season before that, he picked nine scalps at 34.77. Pandya isn't the bowler that can yield 15-plus scalps in a season like spinners of several other sides.

RCB's another spin option who is likely to feature alongside Pandya is Suyash Sharma. A promising youngster, Suyash played a handful of games for KKR, taking 10 scalps from 13 matches. He played just two games last season and conceded at 12-plus in addition to not taking a wicket. So, there is inexperience riding on the player. On the bench, RCB lacks bite with no

notable names.

Another problem for RCB is the lack of quality Indian pacers, barring Bhuvi and Dayal. RCB have no choice but to field these two in every game. The franchise would find themselves in a soup if an injury or poor form incurs. RCB spent a whopping INR 6 crore on inexperienced Rasikh Salam Dar. By the look of things, he is unlikely to find a starting berth. And RCB would be forced to play him if they want to change things also because of the price tag attached. RCB lack experience and character in the Indian pace-bowling unit, and that's a worry.

PROBABLE PLAYING XI OF RCB: Phil Salt, Virat Kohli, Rajat Patidar, Liam Livingstone, Krunal Pandya, Jitesh Sharma, Tim David, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Josh Hazlewood, Suyash Sharma, Yash Dayal.

WHO CAN BE RCB'S IMPACT PLAYERS?

With the Impact Player rule, teams can name five substitutes and use one of them when needed. If four foreign players are already named in the XI, the impact player can only be an Indian. RCB's best balance is the above-mentioned starting XI owing to the resources. So if they bat first, Padikkal will fit in. And then, during bowling, he could be replaced by someone like Suyash.

RCB: PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR IN IPL 2025

VIRAT KOHLI: With over 8000 runs in the IPL, Kohli will once again be the main asset for the franchise. After a solid 2024 season, Kohli would want to continue his exploits. Moreover, their responsibility as captain could help him more in order to lead the side and get the players playing well under him from the start.

IPL 2025: RCB WILL FIGHT FOR PLAY-OFFS BERTH

RCB's lack of bench strength in Indian names seems to be a worry in both batting and bowling. The spin factor, as mentioned above, remains. Also, they missed out on some key figures at the auction, where a smart move would have aided them. However, of late, RCB have shown that despite shortcomings, they have a tendency to reach the playoffs. So, with a strong XI on paper, RCB could push for a top-four. ■

FEATURE

IPL 2025: 3 STRENGTHS AND 3 WEAKNESSES OF PUNJAB KINGS

CEAT
INDIA
SHREY

The major attraction during the auction for PBKS was the capture of Shreyas Iyer. Punjab went all out for the IPL title-winning captain of 2024. A sum of Rs. 26.75 crore was spent on the Indian batter, who was with Kolkata Knight Riders. IPL's highest wicket-taker and the best T20 performer with the ball among....

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Punjab Kings will once again need to start from scratch. This is a side that often goes for a complete overhaul during the Indian Premier League auctions and then tries to build again, only for them to repeat the process. An underperforming side in the cash-rich league, Punjab went on to retain just two players ahead of the IPL 2025 mega auction in Jeddah last month. Prabhsimran Singh and Shashank Singh were the two players retained. At the auction, they used the RTM card for star pacer Arshdeep Singh. They also signed back an utility player in Harpreet Brar. Barring these four players, PBKS have a new look altogether.

The major attraction during the auction for PBKS was the capture of Shreyas Iyer. Punjab went all out for the IPL title-winning captain of 2024. A sum of Rs. 26.75 crore was spent on the Indian batter, who was with Kolkata Knight Riders. IPL's highest wicket-taker and the best T20 performer with the ball among Indian bowlers – Yuzvendra Chahal – was a solid buy for Rs. 18 crore. PBKS also spent a huge chunk of money on Aussie all-rounder Marcus Stoinis and South African pacer Marco Jansen. Glenn Maxwell, Josh Inglis, and Azmatullah Omarzai were added to the roster as well. PBKS have a big squad with plenty of options in the foreign ranks. With some interesting names among Indians, the franchise will be aiming to hit the right chords under new head coach Ricky Ponting. Here, we decode PBKS' strengths, weaknesses, and takeaways from the IPL 2025 squad.

PBKS' SQUAD FOR THE IPL 2025 SEASON

RETAINED PLAYERS AHEAD OF THE AUCTION: **Shashank Singh, Prabhsimran Singh**

Players bought: Arshdeep Singh (Rs. 18 crore), Shreyas Iyer (Rs. 26.75 crore), Yuzvendra Chahal (Rs. 18 crore), Marcus Stoinis (Rs. 11 crore), Glenn Maxwell (Rs. 4.20 crore), Nehal Wadhera (Rs. 4.20 crore), Harpreet Brar (Rs. 1.50 crore), Vishnu Vinod (Rs. 95 lakh), Vijaykumar Vyshak (Rs. 1.80 crore), Yash Thakur (Rs. 1.60 crore), Marco Jansen (Rs. 7 crore), Josh Inglis (Rs. 2.60 crore), Lockie Ferguson (Rs. 2 crore), Azmatullah Omarzai (Rs. 2.40 crore), Harnoor Pannu (Rs. 30 lakh), Kuldeep Sen (Rs. 80 lakh),

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Priyansh Arya (Rs. 3.80 crore), Aaron Hardie (Rs. 1.25 crore), Musheer Khan (Rs. 30 lakh), Suryansh Shedge (Rs. 30 lakh), Xavier Bartlett (Rs. 80 lakh), Pyla Avinash (Rs. 30 lakh), Pravin Dubey (Rs. 30 lakh).

STRENGTHS OF PBKS

Shreyas Iyer is an ideal strength for Punjab this season. He will be an able leader compared to the captains PBKS have had of late. Shreyas has a lot of pedigree, and the title win with KKR last season was an icing on the cake. Earlier, he also led Delhi Capitals to the final. In Shreyas, one not only gets a fine skipper but also a sorted batter at number four. He is an excellent player of spin and his hitting prowess will lift the franchise. An experienced campaigner, Shreyas has all the required ingredients to bring his A-game into play. His understanding and rallying of the squad will benefit the team immensely. Overall, Shreyas owns 3127 runs in the IPL at 32-plus. Last season, he bagged 351 runs, striking at 146-plus.

Another solid strength for PBKS is the presence of Chahal. The veteran spinner was released by Rajasthan Royals ahead of the auction. He had three solid seasons with the Royals and is already their most successful bowler with 66 scalps. He won the Orange Cap in IPL 2022 as well. Before that, Chahal was a vital member of RCB. He remains RCB's highest wicket-taker with 139 scalps from 113 matches. Chahal entered the record books during the IPL 2024 season. He became the first bowler to complete 200 wickets in the tournament. The wrist-spinner has bagged 205 wickets in the IPL at 22.44.

The third major strength of PBKS is their pace attack. Arshdeep leads the way. He is a top customer in T20s and is already India's leading wicket-taker among pacers in T20Is. He had an excellent ICC T20 World Cup 2024 season. Arshdeep owns 76 scalps in the IPL, including a stellar 19 scalps last season. Supporting Arshdeep is SA's left-arm pacer, Marco Jansen. The former SRH pacer will be an able force to complement Arshdeep. He is excellent with the new ball. He has 93 scalps in T20s from 86 games.

In Yash Thakur, Kuldeep Sen, Vijaykumar Vyshak, Lockie Ferguson, Xavier Bartlett, and Aaron Hardie, PBKS have serious depth in their pace ranks. Not to forget the medium pace available of Marcus Stoinis as well. Then there is Afghanistan's Azmatullah Omarzai, who is a serious pace-bowling all-rounder. So, there is a nice blend of both Indian and foreign ranks in this unit.

WEAKNESSES OF PBKS

Batting seems to be an issue for Punjab. Given they went so heavy on pace, their batting was overlooked. A lack of depth in the ranks means they have to play Josh Inglis, who can open alongside Prabhsimran Singh. Stoinis, Shreyas, Maxwell, Nehal Wadhera and Shashank fill up the remaining slots. On paper, this is an able batting unit. But where is the depth on the bench? Also, if a player in the top 7 suffers an injury or bad form, there is a lack of resources available.

23-year-old Priyanshu Arya, with experience of just 16 T20 matches, is an available batter alongside Vishnu Vinod. Vishnu has played only six IPL matches dating back to 2023 and 2017. Apart from these two, PBKS don't have a batter available. This is a serious worry.

SOUTH AFRICA
Amul

The spin department is weak. Barring Chahal, the franchise lacks a commendable second spinner. Harpreet, who has been with the side for some years now, has to chip in. Across 41 IPL games, he owns 25 wickets at an unimpressive average of 35-plus. With Maxwell in the side, his offerings will be a must, given the lack of resources. PBKS have to get a few overs from Maxwell and Brar. Are they solid customers in a spin? The answer is a big no.

Pace is a strength of PBKS, as mentioned above, but it also serves as a weakness. What will a side do with so many pacers? If you look at the foreign recruits, only Jansen fits in as the main pacer, with Inglis, Maxwell, and Stoinis occupying three of the 4 slots among foreigners. This then leaves a chunk of foreign talents wasted. Omarzai, Ferguson, Bartlett, and Hardie will be left on the bench. Omarzai comes the closest who can be a direct replacement for Jansen as an all-rounder.

Among Indian pacers, Arshdeep will lead, but looking at the XI, the 2nd Indian pacer has to be an impact player. So one between Thakur, Sen, and Vyshak can fit in. Overall, what it does for Punjab is that six of their pacers in 9/10 times will always be on the bench. This is a waste. They could have trimmed it to 3-4 pacers and perhaps added a batter and a spinner in the ranks.

PROBABLE PLAYING XI OF PBKS

Josh Inglis, Prabhsimran Singh (wk), Marcus Stoinis, Shreyas Iyer (c), Glenn Maxwell, Nehal Wadhera, Shashank Singh, Marco Jansen, Harpreet Brar, Arshdeep Singh, Yuzvendra Chahal.

WHO CAN BE THE IMPACT PLAYERS?

If PBKS bat first, the above-mentioned playing XI is the most balanced. And then they can bring in the impact player in the form of a bowler. So Prabhsimran can make way for one of Thakur, Sen, or Vyshak to come in as the side's third pace option. Impact players: Prabhsimran, Thakur, Sen, Vyshak and Arya.

KEY PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR?

GLENN MAXWELL: **Punjab Kings** shelled out INR 4.2 crore for Australian big-hitter Maxwell. Notably, it's a homecoming for Maxwell. He spent his time in Punjab from 2014 to 2020. He moved to Bengaluru next before being released by the latter. Maxwell is a risk for any side as you don't know what is in store.

PUNJAB WILL MISS OUT ON A TOP 4 BERTH

Punjab don't have the balance required to challenge for a top-four berth. They are so pace-heavy that they fail to address batters and spinners. They are a side that will be over-reliant on the main names like Iyer and Chahal. Seeing a chunk of pacers get wasted is a sorry sight. Also, PBKS have always failed to impress on a consistent basis, and this season, too, they run the risk of finishing below the top 6. ■

TOP STORIES

“Physical pain I was very used to, but there were times on the court when I had trouble controlling my breathing”

- Rafael Nadal on thinking about taking a mental health break

“I’m incredibly grateful to receive a wild card into the Australian Open in 2025”

- Stan Wawrinka on getting another chance to play first Grand Slam of the year

VINÍCIUS JÚNIOR AND AITANA BONMATI WIN AWARDS

Real Madrid star Vinícius Júnior finally got his hands on a big global player award. Vinícius was named the men’s player of the year at the FIFA’s “The Best” awards, where Barcelona playmaker Aitana Bonmati continued to clean up in the prizes for women’s soccer. The 24-year-old Vinícius was so disappointed to lose out to Manchester City midfielder Rodri for the Ballon d’Or in October that he and his Madrid team snubbed the ceremony in Paris in protest. This time Rodri ended up second to Vinícius by five points. The Brazil forward was at the FIFA ceremony to collect his award having travelled to Doha on Monday with Madrid for the Intercontinental Cup final against Pachuca. Vinícius echoed those sentiments in an Instagram post, where he took a thinly-disguised dig at presumably the Ballon d’Or voters — journalists from the top 100 countries in the FIFA ranking.

BANNED SUBSTANCE FOUND IN DOPING TEST

Mykhailo Mudryk, one of the most expensive players in soccer history, said he was in “complete shock” after the results of a doping test contained a banned substance. The Chelsea forward, who cost $108 million when signed from Shakhtar Donetsk in 2023, said he had never knowingly broken any rules. “I can confirm that I have been notified that a sample I provided to The FA contained a banned substance,” Mudryk wrote on a post on Instagram. “I know that I have not done anything wrong and remain hopeful that I will be back on the pitch soon.” Chelsea said the 23-year-old Mudryk was contacted by the English Football Association following an “adverse finding” in a routine urine test.

DOUBLE TEAM PRIZE MONEY

Prize money for the 2025 Women's European Championship will more than double, with the 16 teams sharing 41 million euros ($43 million). Each federation will get a minimum of 1.8 million euros ($1.9 million) for playing at Euro 2025 in Switzerland and is obliged to share at least 30% of the money among the players, UEFA's executive committee decided on Monday. The champion can earn up to 5.1 million euros. Clubs whose players compete at the tournament will share 6 million euros ($6.3 million) at a daily rate of 657 euros ($690) per player. That is a total increase of 33% compared to the last women's Euros. The men's Euro 2024 had a total prize fund of 331 million euros ($347 million), from overall revenue of about 2.4 billion euros ($2.5 billion). Germany.

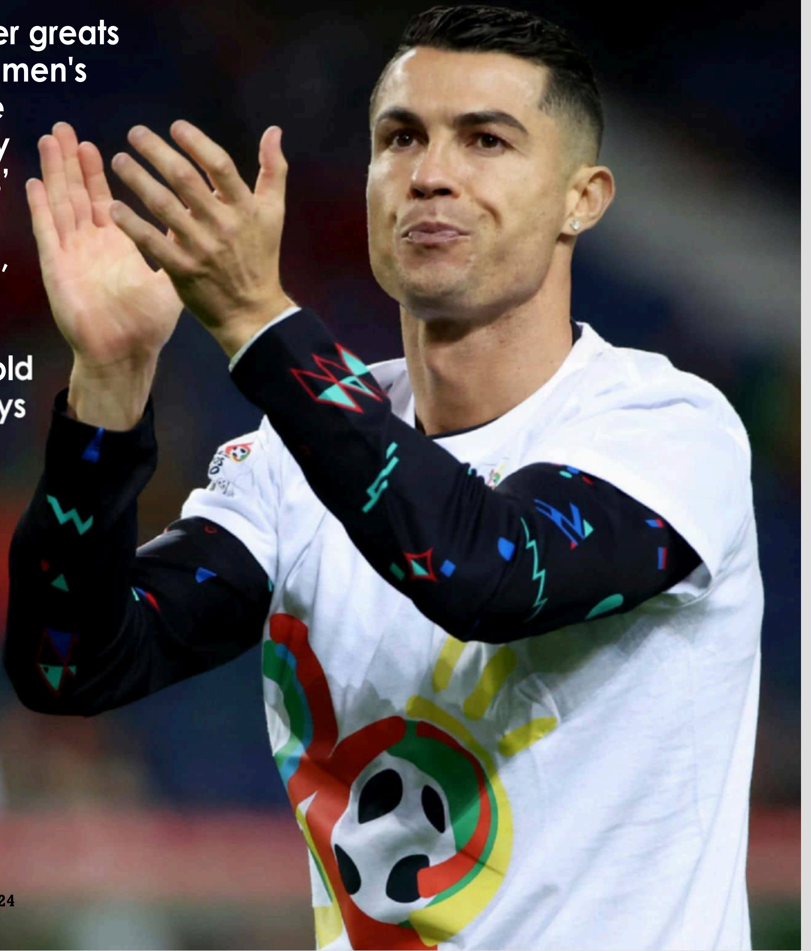
NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR MAN CITY

Pep Guardiola declared himself "not good enough" after Manchester City's season sunk to a new low after a 2-1 defeat to Manchester United. The four-time defending Premier League champion has lost eight of its last 11 games in all competitions - winning just once in that run. City is fifth in the standings and nine points behind leader Liverpool, having played a game more. "I'm the boss, I'm the manager and I'm not good enough. It's as simple as that," Guardiola said after the latest loss. "I'm not doing well. That is the truth." Guardiola has led City to unprecedented success, winning an unprecedented four Premier League titles in a row and six in the last seven seasons. He has won 15 major trophies at the club, including the Champions League.

WILD-CARD ENTRY

Two-time Grand Slam champion Simona Halep, working her way back from a drug suspension, and Hall of Famer Lleyton Hewitt's 16-year-old son Cruz were among the players awarded wild-card entries for Australian Open qualifying next month. Halep, a 33-year-old from Romania, was the runner-up at Melbourne Park in 2018 and won major titles at the French Open later that year and at Wimbledon in 2019. She has been ranked as high as No. 1 but is currently 877th and hasn't played at any Grand Slam tournament since 2022 after missing all tournaments for 1 1/2 years because of a doping case. Cruz Hewitt is ranked outside the top 1,000. His father, who won two major trophies and reached No. 1 in the rankings, made his Australian Open debut in 1997 at age 15 via a qualifying wild card. Lleyton Hewitt retired in 2016, was elected to the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 2021 and is currently Australia's Davis Cup captain.

MESSI AND RONALDO MISS OUT ON MEN'S FIFPRO WORLD XI



The all-time soccer greats did not make the men's World Team of the Year organized by the global Players' Union FIFPRO. The 37-year-old Messi, who plays for MLS side Inter Miami, and the 39-year-old Ronaldo, who plays for Al-Nassr...

BY STAFF WRITER

No Lionel Messi and no Cristiano Ronaldo. The all-time soccer greats did not make the men's World Team of the Year organized by the global Players' Union FIFPRO. The 37-year-old Messi, who plays for MLS side Inter Miami, and the 39-year-old Ronaldo, who plays for Al-Nassr in the Saudi Pro League, were the only players not with European clubs voted onto a 26-man shortlist by FIFPRO last week.

This year's team of the year featured six players from record 15-time Champions League winner Real Madrid and four from Premier League heavyweights Manchester City, with Liverpool's standout center half Virgil van Dijk the other player selected. The World XI was voted for by professional players from 70 countries.

City's Ederson is in goal, with Madrid duo Dani Carvajal and Antonio Rüdiger partnering Van Dijk in defense. A stellar midfield saw Jude Bellingham and Toni Kroos (Madrid) picked alongside playmaker Kevin De Bruyne and Ballon d'Or winner Rodri from City.

Prolific City striker Erling Haaland is teamed up with Kylian Mbappé and his Madrid clubmate Vinicius Jr. in a star-studded attack. It is the first time since 2006 that Messi has not been selected. Argentina's World Cup winner and record eight-time Ballon d'Or winner holds the record after being voted into the team 17 times. Ronaldo has been selected 15 times, but last appeared in 2021.

FIFPRO has invited the world's professional footballers to choose their men's team since 2005 and the women's team since 2015. It is the only global football award decided exclusively by the players. A record-breaking 7,000 women's players voted. Chelsea defender Lucy Bronze — formerly with Barcelona — was selected for a record-equalling seventh time to match Lyon and France defender Wendie Renard.

Two-time women's Ballon d'Or winner Aitana Bonmatí is in midfield after helping Barcelona win the Spanish League, the Spanish Cup, and the Champions League.

Brazilian veteran Marta, 38, returned for the first time since 2021, while 24-year-old Zambia striker Barbra Banda (Shanghai Shengli and Orlando Pride) became the first African woman to make the team of the year.

England's Mary Earps (Manchester United and Paris Saint-Germain) was chosen as goalkeeper with Olga Carmona (Real Madrid and Spain) and Alex Greenwood (Manchester City and England) also in defense.

Alexia Putellas joined countrywoman Bonmatí in an all-Barcelona midfield alongside England's Keira Walsh.

The attack features Colombia's Linda Caicedo (Real Madrid) and England's Lauren James (Chelsea). ■

ARYNA SABALENKA WINS THE WTA PLAYER OF THE YEAR AWARD

Sabalenka, a 26-year-old from Belarus, won the Australian Open in January and the U.S. Open in September, along with two other titles this season, going 56-14 with nearly $10 million in prize money. She overtook Iga Swiatek for the top...

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BY STAFF WRITER

Aryna Sabalenka received the WTA Player of the Year award for the first time after winning two Grand Slam titles and finishing 2024 at No. 1 in the rankings. In other results of voting by tennis media, Emma Navarro was honored as Most Improved Player, Paula Badosa was named Comeback Player, Lulu Sun was Newcomer of the Year, and Sara Errani and Jasmine Paolini were picked as the Doubles Team of the Year.

Sabalenka, a 26-year-old from Belarus, won the Australian Open in January and the U.S. Open in September, along with two other titles this season, going 56-14 with nearly $10 million in prize money. She overtook Iga Swiatek for the top ranking in October. Navarro made her debut in the WTA's top 10 in September after making her deepest Grand Slam run at the U.S. Open, where she eliminated defending champion Coco Gauff in the fourth round before losing to Sabalenka in the semifinals.

The 23-year-old Navarro, who grew up in South Carolina and won the 2021 NCAA singles championship at the University of Virginia, won her first tour title at Hobart, Australia, in January and moved from No. 32 in the rankings at the start of 2024 to No. 8 at the end. Badosa sat out the last half of 2023 with a back injury, but the 27-year-old Spaniard was back near the top of the sport this year, climbing to No. 12 in the rankings, winning the title in Washington and equaling her best result at a Grand Slam tournament by getting to the U.S. Open quarterfinals.

Sun went from outside the top 200 in the rankings to a career-best No. 39, highlighted by a quarterfinal showing as a qualifier at Wimbledon in July and a runner-up finish at the Monterrey Open in August. Sun, 23, was born in New Zealand, grew up in Switzerland, and helped the University of Texas win an NCAA team championship.

Errani and Paolini won a double gold medal for Italy at the Paris Olympics and helped their country win the Billie Jean King Cup. They also reached the French Open doubles final together. In singles, Paolini was the runner-up at both the French Open and Wimbledon. ■

FORMULA 1 IN 2025: CLOSE RACING, LEWIS HAMILTON AT FERRARI, AND PLENTY OF NEW FACES

Major rule changes in F1 tend to shake up the established order but can let one team gain a big advantage. When the same rules are in place for a while, teams tend to be more evenly matched. The season-long competition....

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Even before he'd parked his car after winning the last Formula 1 race of 2024, Lando Norris made a vow to be champion in 2025. “Next year is going to be my year, too,” Norris, who was runner-up to Max Verstappen this year, told the McLaren team over the radio. After four different teams won races in 2024, next year could see an even closer contest for the title. Lewis Hamilton will be aiming for an eighth career championship at his new team, Ferrari, and there'll be ambitious young drivers joining the grid.

CLOSE COMPETITION

Major rule changes in F1 tend to shake up the established order but can let one team gain a big advantage. When the same rules are in place for a while, teams tend to be more evenly matched. The season-long competition for the title in 2021 between Verstappen and Lewis Hamilton preceded a rule change for 2022. Expect McLaren and Norris to be on the hunt next time “The one thing I’ve learned this year is probably to believe in myself a bit more,” Norris said Sunday. "I’ve certainly not come out on top as often as I would have liked in certain moments as a driver, especially in my fights against Max. As much as it hurts sometimes, I’m probably happy about it now that I’m going to go into next season knowing that I can fight." Some worry focusing on 2025 could hurt them in the long run, and may be tempted to aim for 2026 instead.

Carlos Sainz Jr. on Sunday said his new team, Williams, is “preparing to maximize that chance” in 2026. Aston Martin has Adrian Newey, widely considered F1's greatest designer, heading up its development after he left Red Bull. Audi is turning Sauber into its works team for 2026 and General Motors is joining the grid with its Cadillac brand and may already have a head start on development.

“Obviously, the earlier start, the bigger advantage you have,” Red Bull team principal Christian Horner said, “but if there is a tight championship (in 2025) and it does go down to the wire, then that’s going to be a tough balancing act.”

HAMILTON AT FERRARI

A seven-time champion in Ferrari red. Hamilton's move to the storied Italian team could bring back memories of Michael Schumacher, the only other driver to win seven titles in F1. After an emotional farewell to Mercedes on Sunday, Hamilton's focus will shift quickly to 2025. No driver has won the F1 title with Ferrari since Kimi Raikkonen beat then-rookie Hamilton by a single point in 2007.

“Lewis has achieved so much in the sport and it will be a big motivation,” his future teammate Charles Leclerc said. Hamilton, F1's only Black driver, has also said he wants to continue his efforts to improve diversity in F1 when he joins his new team.

NEW CHALLENGERS ON THE GRID

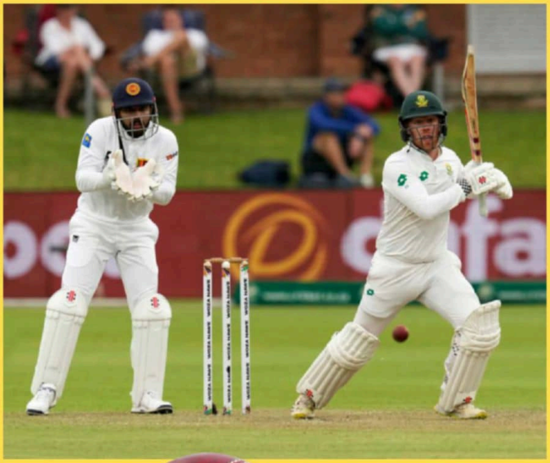
Could 2025 be the year the next generation of drivers upsets F1's biggest names? The biggest rookie class in years arrives in F1 with plenty of hype as 18-year-old Andrea Kimi Antonelli steps up from Formula 2 to replace Hamilton at Mercedes. Oliver Bearman joins Haas after impressive stand-in drives this year, while F2 champion Gabriel Bortoleto moves to Sauber. Alpine gave its new driver, Jack Doohan, son of a motorcycle racing great, an early taste of F1 at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, where he was 15th. Post-season tests on Tuesday in Abu Dhabi offer a chance to get valuable experience.

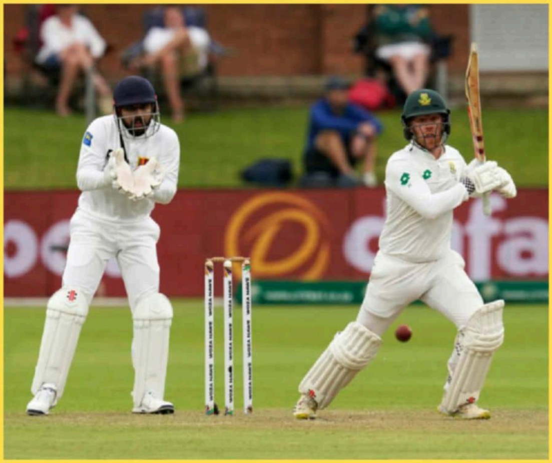
The new arrivals mean experienced drivers will be off the F1 grid.

Ten-time GP winner Valtteri Bottas is likely heading back to Mercedes as a reserve next year after leaving Sauber. Kevin Magnussen, Zhou Guanyu, and Franco Colapinto are also without race seats for 2025. Then there's Sergio Perez. Second to Verstappen in the 2023 standings, the Mexican driver was nowhere near his Red Bull teammate's pace this season and has faced repeated speculation he will be dropped for 2025 despite a contract extension agreed in June. ■

FIND SIX DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THESE TWO PICTURES

CONTEST





In this contest you have to spot six differences between both the pictures. Three lucky winners will get a Parker pen each.

RULES & REGULATIONS FOR THE CONTEST

- **Last date for entries:** January 25, 2025.
- A draw will determine the winner.
- Winners name will be announced in the next issue of cricket today.
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- Send in your answers along with your name, occupation, address, contact No. and Email ID at our postal address.

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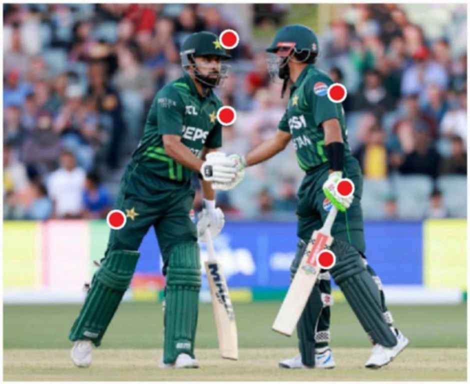
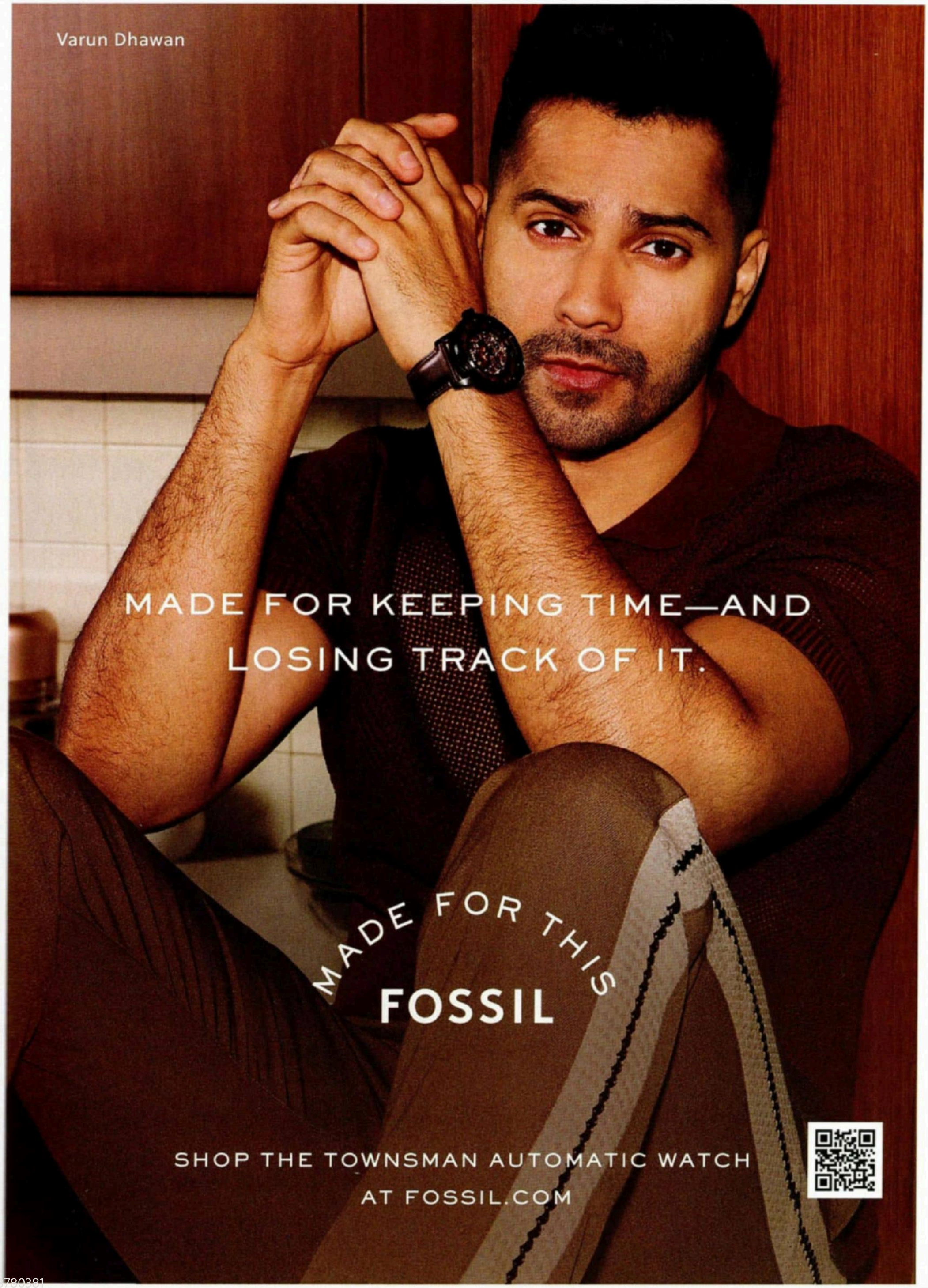


Last months's winners: Karanveer (Noida), Gayatri (Delhi), Naresh (Noida)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